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# Who am I? The Self/Subject according to Psychoanalytic Theory.

Alex Watson

'But now I'm not sure who I am. I use this word "I" and I don't know what it means. I don't know where it begins and ends. I don't even know what it's made of.'

The End of Mr. Y (Thomas, 2007: 278).

## Introduction

There have been several attempts since Freud to introduce into psychoanalytic theory concepts of 'the self' and 'the subject'. This essay argues that these attempts are neither necessary, nor helpful, nor true to Freud's intentions. Freud himself hardly used the terms 'self' or 'subject', and when he did he certainly did not intend them as technical terms.

In America it was Kohut who began talking of the self as a 'psychic structure' (1971: xv), 'a content of the mental apparatus' (p. xv) with a 'psychic location' (p. xv). In England Winnicott introduced the idea of a 'true self' linking it with the id. Guntrip depicts the evolution of psychoanalytic theory as consisting of four stages before it was able to reach its highpoint as 'a theory of the ego as a real personal self' (1968: 127). Bollas and Khan have taken on from Winnicott the idea of the self as an entity, though they differentiate themselves from Winnicott in the following ways. For Bollas the true self consists not only of the id, but also the ego, since the latter contains the 'organizing idiom' and the 'factor of personality' (1987: 8), both of which, for him, form part of the constitution of the self. He regards the 'true self' as 'the historical kernel of the infant's instinctual and ego dispositions' (p. 51). Khan dislikes the

adjective 'true' in Winnicott's phrase (and he accuses Guntrip of falling into the 'danger of romanticization of a pure-self system' [1996: 304]), but 'the self' is a theme throughout his writing, and he regards self-experience as 'more than can be accounted for by our structural hypotheses' (1996: 304). The bulk of this essay will consist of demonstrating how such theoretical directions run counter to Freud's intentions and represent a return to an earlier, more narcissistic mode of thinking from which Freud enabled us to free ourselves.

## Freud

Before Freud the vast majority of European philosophers – from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Descartes – regarded human beings as having an essence, to which they gave the name 'soul' or 'self'. The main characteristic of this supposed entity, apart from it constituting our 'core', was that it was 'the subject'. The meaning of the word subject here is connected to its grammatical meaning as when we say 'the subject of the sentence', the thing which carries out the action denoted by the verb. The self was regarded as the subject of both our mental and our physical actions, i.e. the thinker of our thoughts, experiencer of our experiences, perceiver of our perceptions, feeler of our feelings, as well as the initiator of our physical actions, the agent. Combined with these two characteristics of being the essence and being a subject was the idea of being unitary, single, undivided over time. Thus the self can always be referred to by the word 'I' even when the latter features in such diverse contexts as moral judgements, inner sensations, sense-perceptions, intentions or physical actions ('I deem that irresponsible'; 'I feel a pain'; 'I heard a bang'; 'I plan to retreat'; 'I kicked the ball'.)

It was part of the genius of Freud that he was able to see through this concept. He did not accept the existence of any single entity that could be put forward as an answer to the question 'Who am I' or 'What am I'? We neither are nor contain anything that remains identical over time. Even at one moment of time we are not one thing. Rather we are a multiplicity of interacting systems and processes.

## Topographical Model

Freud's breaking up of the unity of the person begins with his earliest writings on hysteria. For his hysterical patients seemed both to know, yet also to not know, certain things.

Thus Freud writes of Elisabeth von R.'s love for her brother-in-law: 'With regard to these feelings she was in the peculiar situation of knowing and at the same time not knowing' (1895b: 165). And in his discussion of Lucy R., he recounts the following. He had asked her why, if she knew she loved her employer, she had not told Freud. She replied: 'I didn't know—or rather I didn't want to know. I wanted to drive it out of my head and not think of it again; and I believe latterly I have succeeded' (1895a: 117).

How could one entity both know and not know something? Freud's solution was to divide us into consciousness and an unconscious.<sup>1</sup> The unconscious of the patients in question 'knew', but censorship prevented this information from passing into their consciousness.

What we are dealing with here is not something particular to neurotics, but a fundamental plurality of human subjectivity. That it is characteristic of everyone is evidenced by, for example, dreaming. The following footnote, added by Freud in 1919 to 'The Interpretation of Dreams', illustrates how dreaming cannot be explained if we envisage ourselves as a unity:

No doubt a wish-fulfilment must bring pleasure; but the question then arises 'To whom?'. To the person who has the wish of course. But, as we know, a dreamer's relation to his wishes is quite a peculiar one. He repudiates them and censors them – he has no liking for them, in short. So that their fulfilment will give him no pleasure, but just the opposite; and experience shows that this opposite appears in the form of anxiety, a fact

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<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, of course, it is a triple division into that which is unconscious (i.e. completely unavailable to consciousness), preconscious (i.e. potentially available) and conscious (i.e. completely available).

which has still to be explained. Thus a dreamer in relation to his dream-wishes can only be compared to an amalgamation of two separate people who are linked by some important common element (1900: 580–581).

It makes no sense to ask what in all this is the subject, the self. The dreamer? But if that were the case then it would be the dreamer that had the wish, so its fulfilment would give him/her pleasure. The dreamer's experience of anxiety in the face of the wish-fulfilment indicates that we must ascribe the wish to some other agency, an agency that wishes for things that the dreamer does not. The situation can only be satisfactorily explained on the assumption of two different agencies, one that wishes and the other that resists this wish.

To choose one of these two as the self would be arbitrary. But to claim that they are both the self would be contradictory; the very concept of selfhood implies a unity that does not allow for opposed agencies. As Freud implies, we are dealing here with an irreducible plurality, comparable only to 'an amalgamation of two separate people'.

## Structural Model

Thus far we have been looking at the destruction of the concept of 'self' or 'subject' that results from Freud's topographical model. The structural model suggests the same result. Though we may pre-reflectively appear as a unity, we can only be satisfactorily represented as a plurality of the three agencies of id, ego and superego.

### Ego = Self/Subject?

One of the constituents of the structural model, the ego, may look as though it can be equated with 'self' or 'subject': is that not implied by the fact that the literal meaning of the German term, *das Ich*, is 'the I'? But Freud's elaboration of the concept of the ego clearly precludes such an equation. It is true that the ego is the subject of consciousness, but Freud's point is that the subject of consciousness, far from constituting our core, is a marginal agency at the

outer surface of the mind, occasionally able to influence the expression of the id's instincts, but often not. If anything occupies a central position it is the id: on one occasion, Freud describes it as 'the core of our being' (1938: 196). The ego, by comparison, is marginal and impotent, and thus very unlike a 'self' or an autonomous agent, for two reasons.

#### 1) Lack of Power.

Whereas the idea of a self is of something from whose orders all actions proceed, the ego enjoys no such autonomy: 'it is not even master in its own house' (1917a: 285), i.e. within the sphere of the mind. It may order the id to behave in a way that it deems desirable, but 'the life of our sexual instincts cannot be wholly tamed' (1917b: 143). The influence it can exert is lamentably small compared to the idea of a self as sole agent. Freud envisages the mind as a hierarchy of agencies (1917b: 141). The 'highest' agency, the ego, initiates a chain of commands; but at any of the many stages before the command is carried out, it may be met with refusal. It is as though the owner of a newspaper tells the editor what he wants to be written, the editor tells the writer, the writer writes it, but then someone at the printing press does not like it so refuses to print it (my comparison not Freud's).

The limit of the ego's power can also be seen on the level of thought: it does not decide what thoughts arise, when they arise, and neither can it order them away once they have arisen:

Thoughts emerge suddenly without one's knowing where they come from, nor can one do anything to drive them away. These alien guests even seem to be more powerful than those which are at the ego's command. They resist all the well-proved measures of enforcement used by the will, remain unmoved by logical refutation, and are unaffected by the contradictory assertions of reality (1917b: 141-142).

Freud mentions disowned impulses that feel foreign to the ego, which the ego fears, takes precautions against, yet feels paralyzed

by. Psychoanalysis, he says, speaks thus to such an ego (1917b: 142):

You over-estimated your strength when you thought you could treat your sexual instincts as you liked and could utterly ignore their intentions. The result is that they have rebelled and have taken their own obscure paths to escape this suppression; they have established their rights in a manner you cannot approve.

So here too the ego is portrayed as quite unable to defend against rebellions on the part of the id.

## 2) Lack of Knowledge.

Whereas a self is characterized as aware of all of our thoughts and feelings, the ego 'must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind' (1917a: 285). The reports available to it are neither complete nor always accurate. Consciousness has access only to a small fraction of the mind's current activities. Rhetorically addressing the ego, Freud writes (1917b: 142-143):

You feel sure that you are informed of all that goes on in your mind if it is of any importance at all, because in that case, you believe, your consciousness gives you news of it. And if you have had no information of something in your mind you confidently assume that it does not exist there. Indeed, you go so far as to regard what is "mental" as identical with what is "conscious" – that is, with what is known to you – in spite of the most obvious evidence that a great deal more must constantly be going on in your mind than can be known to your consciousness. Come, let yourself be taught something on this one point! What is in your mind does not coincide with what you are conscious of; whether something is going on in your mind and whether you hear of it, are two different things. In the ordinary way, I will admit, the intelligence which reaches your consciousness is enough for your needs; and you may cherish the illusion that you learn of all the more important things. But in some cases, as in that of an instinctual conflict such as I have de-

scribed, your intelligence service breaks down and your will then extends no further than your knowledge. In every case, however, the news that reaches your consciousness is incomplete and often not to be relied on. Often enough, too, it happens that you get news of events only when they are over and when you can no longer do anything to change them. Even if you are not ill, who can tell all that is stirring in your mind of which you know nothing or are falsely informed? You behave like an absolute ruler who is content with the information supplied him by his highest officials and never goes among the people to hear their voice.

It is thus inappropriate to equate the ego with the self because not only does it have at best intermittent control over the id, it also has only partial knowledge of the contents of its own mind.<sup>2</sup>

Freud aligned himself on this point with Copernicus and Darwin. The former undermined the narcissism that regarded man's planet as the centre of the universe; the latter undermined the narcissism that set man apart from animals as God's favourite creature. But Freud predicted that 'human megalomania' would suffer its 'most wounding blow' from psychoanalysis' contention that the ego is not even supreme within its own mind (1917a: 285; 1917b: 139-143).

### Id = Self/Subject?

Could the id be characterized as our 'self'? Is this not suggested by Freud's remark about the id being the 'core of our being'? But to describe the id as the 'self', given that it departs so far from the usual connotations of the concept of a self, would be at best counter-intuitive and at worst meaningless. The id is not the subject

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<sup>2</sup> Two other considerations make the ego unsuitable for being equated with the self: 1) A part of it is unconscious. In Freud's early writings the ego was held to be co-extensive with consciousness; but in his 1923 essay, 'The Ego and the Id', he expressed his realization that resistance, though proceeding from the ego, is unconscious (see, e.g., pp. 16-18). Thus he had to accept that the ego is not wholly conscious. 2) The ego itself can be split and divided against itself: see (in the context of fetishism) Freud (1915: 189).

of consciousness. It can neither know itself, nor make itself known, depending for that on the ego: it 'is accessible even to our own knowledge only through the medium of another agency' (Freud 1938: 196). It is not the part of us that is capable of reason, nor that which perceives the external world.

Neither is it unitary, but rather a plurality of instincts differentiated from each other because of being associated with different organs (1938: 197). These various instincts are often opposed to each other, moreover, some being predominantly infused with Eros and some with destructiveness (1938: 196).

Thus Freud's intention was not, having removed selfhood and subjectivity from the ego, to rehabilitate them in the id. Rather he regarded them as suspect concepts, to be done away with altogether. It was simply narcissism that gave rise to them and sustains them, with their implications of autonomy and unity (1917a: 284-285; 1917b: 139-143).

Besides, to select just one out of three things would be arbitrary and too restricted, given that it is the combination of the three that is supposed to represent the workings of our mind.

#### Id + Ego + Superego = Self/Subject?

In that case how about characterizing the conglomeration of all three as the 'self' or 'subject'? The problem with this move is that the conglomeration would only be misleadingly characterized by those terms. The three constituents lack sufficient compatibility and mutual coherence to be capturable by these concepts that suggest unity. The id and the ego do not share common goals (pleasure v's safety), do not function according to the same principles (pleasure principle v's reality principle). In fact the id can threaten the very existence of the ego: though it cannot do away with it altogether, it can shatter its carefully built-up structure or change it back into a portion of the id.<sup>3</sup> Freud describes the id as an enemy of

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<sup>3</sup> See Freud (1938: 199):

the ego, and one that is harder to defend against than an external enemy. One can flee from an external enemy, but the id is always by the side of the ego; even if it can be temporarily held down, it continues to issue threats from that position.<sup>4</sup>

The ego is similarly antagonistic and antipathetic to the id. The impulses emerging from the id seek to actualize themselves but they are obstructed by the ego, which, if it does not approve of them, 'ruthlessly' inhibits them.<sup>5</sup>

If ego and id were portrayed by Freud as companions functioning cooperatively to achieve a common purpose, they could more easily be

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The ego, which seeks to maintain itself in an environment of overwhelming mechanical forces, is threatened by dangers which come in the first instance from external reality; but dangers do not threaten it from there alone. Its own id is a source of similar dangers, and that for two different reasons. In the first place, an excessive strength of instinct can damage the ego in a similar way to an excessive 'stimulus' from the external world. It is true that the former cannot destroy it; but it can destroy its characteristic dynamic organization and change the ego back into a portion of the id.

<sup>4</sup> See Freud (1938: 200):

It adopts the same methods of defence against both, but its defence against the internal enemy is particularly inadequate. As a result of having originally been identical with this latter enemy and of having lived with it since on the most intimate terms, it has great difficulty in escaping from the internal dangers. They persist as threats, even if they can be temporarily held down.

<sup>5</sup> See Freud (1917b: 141):

Somewhere in the nucleus of his ego he has developed an organ of observation to keep a watch on his impulses and actions and see whether they harmonize with its demands. If they do not, they are ruthlessly inhibited and withdrawn.

subsumed under a unitary whole, but they are depicted as mutually antagonistic and independent.

At this point the reader may respond: But surely the three of them are three constituents of something; they constitute a larger whole. This larger whole may be heterogeneous, but what is the harm in talking of a heterogeneous or divided `self' or `subject'? Why cannot a single thing contain within itself opposing tendencies?

1) To speak of one thing containing ego, id and superego implies the existence of some entity that exists over and above these three. But there is no extra entity to which the three belong: the mind is nothing other than the plurality of these three.

2) If we want some term for the three of them together, let us either use some new concept other than the self or the subject, which does not contain the shortcomings of those, or let us stick with what Freud himself uses here – terms such as the mind, the psyche. These are non-technical terms. Other non-technical terms are harmless, such as `the person' or `the individual'. Psychoanalysis does not need to suggest that such terms are eliminated from language; but it should remember that for Freud 1) they were not `scientific', and 2) when that which they designate is analyzed `scientifically' (1917a: 284, 285; 1917b: 139, 142), it is revealed as a plurality of three antagonistic and independent systems or agencies.

## Ogden

I hope to have shown by now that those who speak of the self as an entity, such as the authors mentioned in the introduction, are theorizing in a way that is neither necessary nor true to Freud's intentions.<sup>6</sup> Ogden's position (1992a, 1992b) is more subtle, for two reasons. He deliberately avoids the use of the term `self', being

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<sup>6</sup> Of course a much more lengthy study than this would be required to examine what benefits these authors derive from, for example, the distinction between a true self and a false self, and to propose ways in which these benefits can be retained even without resorting to such terminology.

suspicious of its 'static, reifying meanings' (1992a: 522). Secondly, he uses the term 'subject' not to refer to a fixed entity but to something that is 'dialectically constituted'. In case it seems, therefore, that his position is little different from that argued for here, the rest of the essay will be taken up with a critique of it.

Ogden's two articles (1992a, 1992b) on what he terms the 'dialectically constituted/decentred subject of psychoanalysis' can be analyzed as consisting of two strands. In one, he masterfully deconstructs the concept of 'the subject' through a selection of positions advocated by Freud, Klein and Winnicott. Each of these three he depicts as having in different ways undermined the concept of a unitary subject: Freud through his divisions of the mind into 1) consciousness and the unconscious, and 2) id, ego and superego; Klein and Winnicott through their emphasis on an intersubjective context as a necessary requirement for a sense of individual subjectivity.<sup>7</sup>

But having deconstructed 'the subject', Ogden then reconstructs it in the second strand. Having shown that the subject is neither consciousness nor the dynamic unconscious, he then argues that it is 'constituted' by 'the dialectical interplay' between the two (1992a: 518). Having replaced it with id, ego and superego, and shown it to be represented by none of these taken singly, he then reconstitutes it as the 'discourse of' the three (1992a: 520). A concept that has been shown to be redundant thus becomes resuscitated. What would, according to the reasoning both of this essay and of Ogden's first strand, preferably remain decomposed becomes recomposed.

Ogden's preoccupation with the question of the 'location of the subject' (1992a, 1992b: passim) reveals a belief that the subject must be located somewhere. But this belief is only valid if we remain committed to the view that a subject exists. When Ogden writes that 'The subject for Freud is to be sought in the phenomenology corresponding to that which lies in the relations *between* [his italics]

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<sup>7</sup> On the dependence of subjectivity on intersubjectivity, see also Crossley (1996), especially chapter 3: 'Imagination, Self and Other: On Egological Intersubjectivity', pp. 49–72.

consciousness and unconsciousness' (1992a: 519), it is not surprising that he supplies no reference to Freud's writings: I doubt if one could be found where Freud states that 'the subject is to sought' anywhere. The sentence reveals Ogden's assumption that the subject must be sought. But if it is an illusion, why does it need to be sought?

Having not found it to be equivalent to ego, id or superego, he sees it as constituted out of the interplay of these three. But Freud's concern, I hope by now to have shown, is to undermine the idea of a single subject. So to say 'the subject is X' is not being true to Freud's intentions, whatever referent we supply for X.

Ogden provides an incisive account of the way in which the subject has been decentred, dethroned, dispersed, but he then cannot resist the urge to re-instate it. A sign that he is not being true to Freud is his claim (1992a: 517) that a 'central', 'irreducible element' of psychoanalysis is Freud's 'conception of the subject'. Yet, as he himself admits (1992a: 517), Freud hardly used the term 'subject'. It is perhaps in order to address this seeming inconsistency that he asserts, 'Despite the central importance of this theme, it remained a largely implicit one in Freud's writing' (1992a: 517). But if the theme was not addressed explicitly by Freud, in what sense is it of central importance? Thus I regard as highly dubious his claim that in Freud's writing one can 'discern the creation of a new conceptual entity: the psychoanalytic subject' (1992a: 517). The concept of the 'psychoanalytic subject' should rather be viewed as an invention of Ogden's.

Some may want to counter that Ogden's position is not significantly different from that proposed here, in that both claim the subject to be nothing other than ego, id and superego (or consciousness, pre-conscious and unconscious). The difference lies in the interpretation of the words 'nothing other than'. When a physicist says that 'heat is *nothing other than* movement of molecules', he is not proposing that heat is an illusion. He is proposing the reduction of heat to something more fundamental, but not the elimination of the concept of heat. Indeed the validity of the concept of heat is safeguarded by

the fact that it can easily be translated into the more fundamental level of molecule-movement. But when a sceptic says that 'the ghost in the garden is *nothing other than* the play of light and shadow and rustling of leaves', he is proposing that the ghost is an illusion. He is proposing not the reduction of the concept of ghosts to something else, but its elimination. Ogden's view of the relationship of 'the subject' to ego, id and superego is equivalent to that of heat and molecule-movement; mine is equivalent to ghosts and light, shadow and rustling.

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