

## US OR ME?

### - IS THE GROUP ALWAYS THERE?<sup>1</sup>

**Glenn Brady**

*Groups are commonly understood to be a collection of separate individuals. But does this help us understand how the human subject and groups truly relate?*

*Multiple writings of Freud and Lacan on the Ego and groups, including Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921)<sup>2</sup>, and Lacan's *Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis* (1954-1955)<sup>3</sup>, will be examined in a theoretical analysis, to explore how these concepts relate. The problematic in naming and conceptualising these phenomena is also investigated. It is postulated that they uncover a misleading tradition in thought that begins with Descartes and continues with ego psychology, and that equates the ego with the human Subject.*

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<sup>2</sup> S. Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. (1921). Standard Edition, XVIII. London, Hogarth Press.

<sup>3</sup> J. Lacan, *Book II The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis* 1954-1955. Edited by Miller, J-A. (1991). Translated by Tomaselli, S., with Notes by Forrester, J. WW Norton.

*This paper argues that this framework of thought is inescapable without a subversion by a psychoanalytic understanding of what we conceive of as the human subject itself. This uncovers a much more complex relationship between the so-called individual and the group, one with less distinct lines of demarcation. Furthermore, any approach that promotes an emboldening of the ego only impedes psychoanalytic aims.*

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### **Who is I?**

The very basis of our ‘individual’ ‘reality’ is in question for Freud when he tells us that ‘Hypnosis is not a good object of comparison with a group formation, because it is truer to say that it is identical with it.’<sup>4</sup> Freud also tells us that ‘from the very first, individual psychology...is at the same time social psychology as well.’<sup>5</sup> This way of elucidating the complexity of ideas that might otherwise be incorrectly assumed to be self-evident, fundamentally challenges the ‘cogito’ of Descartes as being a mirror, a proton-pseudos. From where comes the existence of the ‘I’ that thinks, if it is only later instituted as existing, predicated on its first instance? This reasoning is circular and tautological, for is it possible that the ‘I’ does not exist in the way that we imagine it to, if its existence is predicated on the fact of my assumption that it is the ‘I’ who is doing the thinking? It is not self-evident that the I, who self-reflects, really knows who is speaking at all. Descartes tells us that when someone says ‘I am thinking therefore I am or exist, he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism but recognises it as

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<sup>4</sup> S. Freud, op. cit. p. 115.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p. 69.

something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind'.<sup>6</sup> This is disingenuous. The 'ergo' points to the syllogism inherent in the statement. He is literally basing the existence of the 'I' on the thinking of the first 'I', that he wishes into existence. His references to 'self-evident' and 'simple intuition' are his sleight of hand to deter the reader from further examination of his basic premises. Indeed he exposes the deceptive nature of this method when he expresses the hope in a letter to his philosopher friend Marin Mersenne on 28 January 1641, that 'my readers will get used to my principles without perceiving that they are doing so, and before they notice that my principles destroy those of Aristotle.'<sup>7</sup> Descartes went on to defend himself against the circularity of his syllogism by rephrasing it as 'Ego sum, ego existo' or 'I am, I exist,'<sup>8</sup> in his *Meditations*. Here he draws an exact equivalence between thinking and existence of the I. Thinking is literally existence for Descartes. Thought, is Ego, is I. As he says 'I am, then, in the strict sense, only a thing that thinks'.<sup>9</sup> Combined with his methodological doubt, the problem this creates, is the contention that truth can be reached through thinking with reasoning. And he does equate knowledge of his existence with truth as he says 'And yet it is surely surprising that I should have a more distinct grasp of things which I realise are doubtful, unknown and foreign to me, than I have of that which is

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<sup>6</sup> R. Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method*. (2008). Oxford University Press, UK. p. lv.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. liii.

<sup>8</sup> R. Descartes, *Meditations of First Philosophy*, (1986), (1641), John Cottingham, trans., Latin-English edition, Cambridge University Press. p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p. 18.

true and known – my own self.’<sup>10</sup> Furthermore he ascribes truth to be found more readily in waking thoughts when he says ‘reason tells us also that as our thoughts cannot all be true because we are not wholly perfect, what truth there is in them must infallibly be found in those we have while awake rather than those we have in our dreams.’<sup>11</sup>

Why all this emphasis on Descartes? Well, as Lacan points out, the evidence of this notion of the ego in its nascent state begins in ‘the middle of the sixteenth, beginning of the seventeenth centuries’.<sup>12</sup> These are the root difficulties and misconceptions I believe Freud and Lacan are addressing in relation to their subversion of our illusions of what the individual human subject and the group are. Freud tells us that the gradual process of emergence of individual psychology from that of group psychology may still be incomplete.<sup>13</sup> My question is, does it also leave an amnesia that necessarily leads us into a distorted idea of our own separateness? One which we traditionally imagine to be our individuality. What consequences would this have for our interpretation of reality? What influences can the group maintain over us, if this is a state of delusion?

### **The ‘Ego-Ideal’ myth and the ‘New Reality’ of the Individual**

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> R. Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method*. *op. cit.* p.34.

<sup>12</sup> J. Lacan, *op. cit.* pp.6-7.

<sup>13</sup> S. Freud, *op. cit.* p. 123.

In his exposition of the development of the 'individual' out of the 'group', Freud tells us that the father of the primal horde was the 'ideal' of each one of the sons.<sup>14</sup> He goes on to postulate a story of development whereby, what he describes as an 'epic poet'<sup>15</sup>, through his longing and imagination, disguised the truth with lies, and invented the heroic myth. He tells us this poet is the one who created the first 'ego ideal'. Freud tells us that this fairytale contains traces of the facts that were disavowed. The facts being that it was a collection of the brothers who killed the father of the primal horde.

From the hero's myth of having singularly slain the totemic monster of the tyrannical father of the primal horde, we find the birth of the individual from the group, according to Freud.<sup>16</sup> Freud describes the hero as presenting a new reality in the form of this story, resulting in his hearers identifying with him through the myth. In the establishment of this myth, the move from the group to the individual inevitably veils the origin of our thinking. Freud sounds a portentous tone when he tells us that 'the primal horde may arise once more out of any random collection; in so far as men are habitually under the sway of group formation, we recognize in it the survival of the primal horde.'<sup>17</sup> Does this mean that there are disavowed aspects to ourselves that are liable to take over us, to the extent of the violent excesses of the primal horde, if we continue to elevate the primacy of the myth of our separateness?

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 135.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 136.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 123.

Are we inevitably mapped on to some significant other who went before us? What is the magnitude of the consequences for our so-called ‘reality’, if this is true? How much of me is ‘individual’? Is ‘individual’ a misnomer? The Cambridge English Dictionary defines the individual as ‘a single person or thing, especially when compared to the group or set to which they belong’.<sup>18</sup>

### **Only Love can transcend Narcissism**

In addressing the subject of love and groups, Freud tells us that ‘love relationships (or to use a more neutral expression, emotional ties) also constitute the essence of the group mind’.<sup>19</sup> He tells us that these love relationships are hidden by the screen of ‘suggestion’.<sup>20</sup> He also tells us that a group is held together by this love.

How does this love relate to the ‘ego-ideal’? In isolating ‘Identification’ as the earliest expression of love<sup>21</sup>, Freud shows us that a boy takes his father as his ideal and develops true object cathexis towards his mother. Importantly he tells us that identification is ambivalent from the first, a derivative of the cannibalistic inclinations for assimilation of those loved. There is both hostility and love. The setting up of an ego ideal can be seen to be essentially a love relation – one of ‘what one would like to *be*’.<sup>22</sup> Freud tells us that ‘identification endeavours to mould a person’s own ego after

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<sup>18</sup> Cambridge English Dictionary, n.d.

<sup>19</sup> S. Freud, op. cit. p. 91.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* pp. 91-92.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p.105.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p. 106.

the fashion of the one that has been taken as a model'.<sup>23</sup> If I fully invest in this ego as being who I truly am, is this a disavowal of the origins of the ego as emanating from an other? If it is, what are its consequences? Similar to the necessity of mothering containing potentially death-dealing consequences if over-prolonged or too close a relationship, bordering on the incestuous, can the relationship with an ego-ideal potentially contain harmful and self-deluding consequences in my apprehension of who 'I' am? Both an important necessity and a danger? Freud certainly alludes to this in his description of melancholias where the ego-ideal rages relentlessly and unjustifiably against the ego.<sup>24</sup> The other important fact that Freud is showing us here is the essentially divided nature of the individual mind. In the case of the ego-ideal, the distance between it and the Ego is not far for many people and can thus confound us once again as to who we are.

The excesses of being in love are exemplified by the idealization of the object. Freud shows us that there is only a short step between being in love and hypnosis. If hypnosis is identical with group formation, he is showing us the trepidation that group formation holds. When Freud tells us that the hypnotist has stepped into the place of the ego ideal, is he saying that in groups we put a leader also into that position? It is here that Freud, very importantly points to us that among the functions of the ego ideal lies 'the business of testing the reality of things'.<sup>25</sup> It is here that the very basis of our reality can be seen to lie in the hands of an other, in a situation of idealization. But can the

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p. 109.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p. 114.

excesses of idealization only be moderated somewhat in our daily reality? Are we still inevitably bound to the other in the creation of our reality? It appears that our very reality is not an immediate replica of some external occurrences, but rather that we meet it halfway through facilitations and associations laid down with the help of external actors providing us satisfactions, and that these very early identifications do indeed influence our perceptions and help form our ego.<sup>26</sup> Freud, very early on, drew our attention to this in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology*.<sup>27</sup> Thinking is therefore, innately biased, and not ‘self-evidently’ our own, or ‘I’, as Descartes would have us believe. As Freud says ‘it is in relation to a fellow human being that a human being learns to cognize’.<sup>28</sup> Reality in this sense is an individual experience, bound to some others.<sup>29</sup> So, is this conception of the ‘I’ never truly a tabula rasa? And do we ignore this at our peril? What have we rejected in the adoption of the Ego as I?

### **I is an other**

Lacan tells us of Freud’s discovery, ‘I is an other’<sup>30</sup>. In his *Seminar II*, he shows us that it was not always the case that the ego was pre-eminent, as being what we understood ourselves to be. Yet he exclaims that ‘we can no longer do our thinking without this

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<sup>26</sup> S. Freud, *Project for a scientific psychology*. (1895). Standard Edition, I. London, Hogarth Press, 1958, pp. 318-324.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p. 331.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* p. 335.

<sup>30</sup> J. Lacan, *op. cit.* p. 7.

register of the ego'.<sup>31</sup> In a spoken commentary on Freud's *Verneinung*, (*denegation*), in Lacan's Seminar I, Jean Hyppolite sets out to explicate how Freud puts negation at the origin of human intelligence, at the origin of the ego.<sup>32</sup> Negation is the presenting of one's being in the mode of not-being, an act of resistance of the truth of what we are. It is here that Lacan refers to the ego as an 'alienated form of being'<sup>33</sup> whose fundamental function is misunderstanding.<sup>34</sup> Lacan tells us that psychoanalysis 'consists in showing the subject that he is saying more than he thinks he is'.<sup>35</sup> That is, we are more than individual egos. The symbolic function is in fact, autonomous. We are not the masters of ourselves. Furthermore, as Lacan says clearly, we are initially formed in relation to our fellow being.<sup>36</sup> Hyppolite associates the 'destructive tendency' with 'the kind of negation whose true function is to engender intelligence, and the very position of thought.'<sup>37</sup>

In his *Verneinung*, Freud tells us, what is foreign and outside the individual is what is perceived as bad. In fact, at the level of the intellect, they are identical.<sup>38</sup> But if I is an other, then is it the misrecognition by the ego, of 'what is foreign is outside me',

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*. Edited by J-A. Miller, (1991). Translated with Notes by J. Forrester. WW Norton.. p. 747.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p. 52.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* p. 53.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p. 54.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p. 52.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* p. 748.

<sup>38</sup> S. Freud, *The Ego And The ID & Other Works*. (2001). Standard Edition, XIX. London, Hogarth Press. p.237.

that makes us hate the other? 'I' is not the individual. And the human subject, contrary to Descartes' protestation, 'is not the ego', as Lacan tells us.<sup>39</sup> This is the pitfall of not recognising the origins of the individual as being contiguous with the group. As Freud says 'from the very first, individual psychology...is at the same time social psychology as well.'<sup>40</sup>

At a 1966 international symposium hosted by the John Hopkins University in Baltimore, U.S.A., Lacan outlined how it is necessary that the number two constitute the first integer retroactively, and that the first integer is not yet born as a number before the two appears.<sup>41</sup> This is then the birth of all numbers. I believe this demonstration to be synonymous with the necessary interdependence and origin of the Subject in the Other. The group is a collection of others from whence we originate and are interdependent with. Lacan says that the 'question of the two is for us the question of the subject'.<sup>42</sup> He further tells us that 'we reach a fact of psychoanalytical experience in as much as the two does not complete the one to make two, but must repeat the one to permit the one to exist.'<sup>43</sup> And that 'only one repetition is necessary to constitute the

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<sup>39</sup> J. Lacan, op. cit. *Book II*. p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*. (1921). Standard Edition, XVIII. London: The Hogarth Press. p. 69.

<sup>41</sup> J. Lacan, *Of structure as an inmixing of an otherness prerequisite to any subject whatever*. In R. Macksey, & E. Donato, *The Languages of criticism and the sciences of man*. (1970). Baltimore,: Johns Hopkins University Press. pp. 186-200.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* p. 191.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

status of the subject'.<sup>44</sup> This distils the essence of interdependence or interrelatedness. 'I' am not just 'me', 'I' am also 'in essence', part of a group. I is an Other. 'The subject is no one. It is decomposed, in pieces'.<sup>45</sup> Lacan denotes the Other as a collection of signifiers.<sup>46</sup> He furthermore tells us that 'in a universe of discourse nothing contains everything and here you find again the gap that constitutes the subject'.<sup>47</sup> The totality represented by the Cartesian 'I', is a misunderstanding of what the human subject is. In his Seminar II, Lacan tells us that 'Our deduction of the subject...demands that we locate this voice [of symbolic regulation] somewhere in the interhuman game.'<sup>48</sup> Lacan's presentation to the John Hopkins University was on the subject of structure. He shows us here how the question of structure is inside psychoanalytical reality.

### **The Ego in its positive and negative aspects in the formation of groups**

The tendency of the ego to base its perception of reality, cognition, on a relation to a fellow human being, means that from its development, we are, hopefully, inclined to be social beings. This social inclination is, however, a double-edged sword, as we have already noted that Freud shows us that identifications are ambivalent from the first, a derivative of the cannibalistic inclinations for assimilation of those loved. There is both hostility and love. There seems to be born of the ego the dual inclinations to be drawn to others and to be repelled, or at worst to annihilate. In the formation of a group, if we

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> J. Lacan, *op. cit. Book II.* p. 54.

<sup>46</sup> J. Lacan, *op. cit. Of structure as an inmixing of an otherness prerequisite to any subject whatever.* p.193.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> J. Lacan, *op. cit. Book II.* p. 55.

cling too closely, in our identification with the leader and our emotional ties with each other, do we risk necessarily wanting to destroy or assimilate the other in our misapprehension of who we are?

Although Strachey, in his introduction to Freud's *Group Psychology*, tells us that 'there is little direct connection between [it] and its close predecessor, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920g)*'<sup>49</sup>, it is difficult not to feel that something of the *Death Drive* is what is showing itself, in the context of group psychology, in the inclination to destroy the other, the outsider, and in many instances, or eventually, the group itself. 'Libidinal ties are what characterize a group', Freud tells us.<sup>50</sup> Who would want to do without love or groups? But the excesses of such a tie, just as the overvaluation or idealisation of an other is an untrue representation of them, can lead to the abandonment of individual responsibility to the horde. Thereby, an indulgence in our basest instincts can occur. Ambivalence in action. Freud connects the death drive to this inclination for hatred, to which he is tempted to ascribe an 'elementary character'.<sup>51</sup> But the individual in a group is also an example of love for others, for objects, as being the only barrier to love for oneself.<sup>52</sup> He tells us that 'love alone acts as the civilising factor in the sense that it brings a change from egoism to altruism'.<sup>53</sup> He further tells us that 'sexual

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<sup>49</sup> S. Freud, op. cit. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*. p. 67

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.* p. 101.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* p. 102.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* p. 103.

impulsions that are inhibited in their aims...achieve such lasting ties between people'.<sup>54</sup> That we forget the basis of these impulsions, repress the ambivalent feelings associated, to the point of denial, and invest ourselves in the ego as being the 'I', such that any threat to its stability is defended like a garrison under fire, is it any wonder we can be overcome by hatred at a moment's notice?

### **Us or Me? – Is the group always there?**

To the question of whether the group is always there, we have shown that by the nature of identification and the establishment of the ego, there is always a constituent part of the individual that is related to an other. Furthermore, Freud tells us that 'man is...a horde animal, an individual creature in a horde led by a chief'.<sup>55</sup> What Descartes and the traditions of ego-based psychology and object-relations fail to face is the truth of the human condition as outlined by Freud, that 'In the course of our development we have effected a separation of our mental existence into a coherent ego and into an unconscious and repressed portion which is left outside it'.<sup>56</sup> The Unconscious needs to be taken seriously and not be reduced to objects. Freud tells us that 'All the ties upon which a group depends are of the character of instincts that are inhibited in their aims'<sup>57</sup>, and that they are capable of transforming back into uninhibited ones just as they arose out of them.<sup>58</sup> Considering that these can be either life or death should focus our minds.

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<sup>54</sup> *ibid.* p.115.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.* p. 121.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.* p. 131.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.* p. 140.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* p. 139.

### **Object-Relations as a furtherance of Ego-Psychology.**

In his critique of object relations theorists, Lacan points out that the ideal object that they reify and situate the entire analytic experience around, is literally as unthinkable as is the normalisation of the subject.<sup>59</sup> In their quest for the ‘furtherance’ in analytic experience, whatever that means, they focus on the adaptation of an objectified individual to their surroundings. Psychoanalysis is envisaged as a social remedy. This objectification of the subject has the same reductive effects as Descartes’ centralisation of the ego. What constitutes the structure of the subject is disregarded. This paper contends that any approach that promotes an emboldening of the ego only impedes psychoanalytic aims, as in such a formulation the subject is reduced to an object. An object is not a speak-being. The I, as equated by Descartes with thought, is reduced to an object. As ego, it will be jealously defended against any perceived incursion, no matter how ‘unified’ it may seem to be. From the *autonomous ego* of Heinz Hartmann and the ego-psychology tradition, to object-relations and beyond, there seems to be advanced inexhaustive ways of realising the insatiable tendency to centralize the ego as representative of the ‘I’. All the while, the truth of the unconscious subject will confound these reductive efforts. For ‘I’ is not the ego. As Lacan says, ‘we are all inclined to believe that we are ourselves. But we aren’t so sure of it....’<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> J. Lacan, *The Object Relation: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book IV*. Edited by Miller, J-A. (2022).

Translated by Price, A.R. Cambridge, Polity. p.10.

<sup>60</sup> J. Lacan, op. cit. *Book II*. p. 12.



