

Freudian Psychology

Part One: What is it?

The Text

My examples in Part Three are pulled from throughout the sample text.

Read or review it if you want to get full benefit of the mini-lessons.

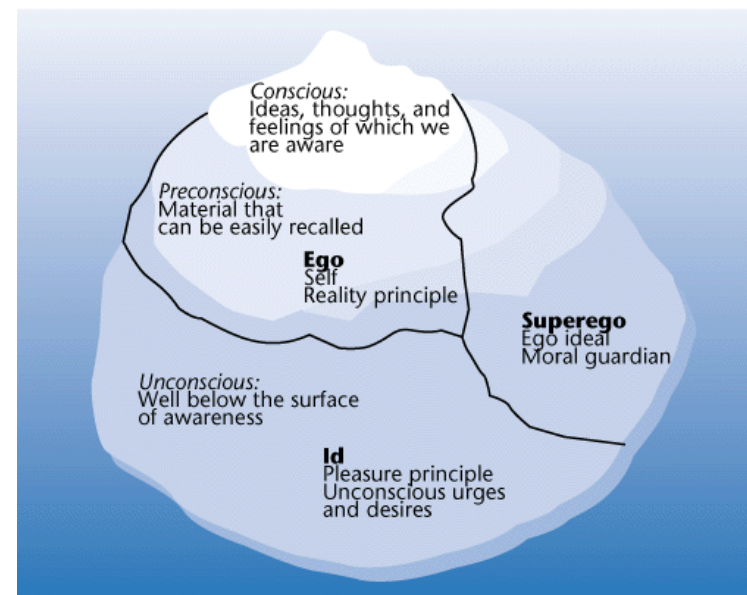


Id, Ego, Super-ego Overview

There's an entire presentation for you to download devoted to explaining these concepts, so I don't feel the need to go over this again in granular detail.

The thing to keep in mind (*Get it? Ha, ha, ha...*) is that this description of the psyche is best seen as a metaphor. There is no Id portion of the brain, for example, and Freud never claimed that there was. His point was to hypothesize about the nature of personality formation, not to describe a physiological process. This is especially true today, when even modern psychology has moved on quite a bit from Freud's early attempts to intuit how the mind works.

Luckily for us, we're writing about literature, so the accuracy or inaccuracy of the metaphor (when applied to the actual functioning of the mind) is largely irrelevant. What matters is if a Freudian approach can help us to understand the way a text works-- especially in texts in which the writer understands the mind in essentially Freudian terms.



Concept: Id

The Id is the instinctual portion of the psyche, seen in its most pure stage in infants (that is, before an independent personality begins to develop and prior to the socialization in the community norms that govern behavior). For Freud, the two most important instinctual drives are the evolutionary imperatives to dominate and reproduce (manifesting as aggression and sexuality).

As such, the Id is completely irrational and completely amoral. It functions according to the Pleasure Principle (the immediate satisfaction of every desire regardless of consequences). When it doesn't get what it wants, the Id gets upset, leading to anxiety.



I'm an angry ape who just wants to fight and find a mate. In this, I'm like the Id

NOTE: Even chimps live in a society with complex social norms, so comparing them to the Id is really doing them a disservice.

The workings of the Id are completely opaque to the conscious mind because we do not want to acknowledge our animal selves, seeing it as shameful. In the iceberg analogy, the Id is completely submerged, part of the unconscious mind.

Concept: Ego

As the name implies, the Ego is both our conscious self and our self-identity. As the name also implies, it is completely selfish. If it behaves well, it is because the Ego is sensitive to what others think about it. It understands that acting like an unreasoning animal is not going to bring about long-term satisfaction, as the Ego knows that fulfilling the Id's desires is both impossible (since the Id wants everything) and has consequences in the real world (usually negative).

Though the Ego wants what the Id wants, it attempts to get it in a reasonable way, often moderating or deferring satisfaction. This is the Reality Principle. Even though it is as amoral as the Id, the Ego understands social expectations and can be convinced by the Super-ego to turn to moral




In terms of horror movie villains, Michael Myers is more like the Id: he is an unreasoning force of nature. Hannibal Lecter is more like the Ego: he executes complex plans to indulge his base instincts. Neither seem to be moderated by the Super-ego; they have no moral self.

ends. In the iceberg analogy, it is the portion that's above the water.

Concept: Super-ego

This is the moral portion of the psyche, and the value that it embodies are learned from authority figures (especially parents), community institutions, and societal standards of behavior (including legal and religious norms). These values, then, will vary from society to society and display different emphases dependent on cultural contexts. When the Super-ego convinces the Ego to turn toward moral ends, we experience pride; when the Ego gives in to the Id's demands, we experience guilt.



I'm judging you, and you will never be good enough to meet my standards.

Like the Id, the Super-ego is completely unreasonable, as it is it is never satisfied short of absolute perfection. Even then an unchecked Super-ego would still argue that the Ego could have done more. Without the Super-ego, there could be no society, since there could be no shared values. At the same time, it is the source of many psychological pathologies, as the Super-ego is responsible for our Ideal Self. If our Ideal Self demands perfection, it leads to anxiety and paralyzing self-doubt. Both of these can lead to much bigger problems.

In the iceberg analogy, the Super-ego is mostly submerged.

Concept: How the Mind Works

Dreams reveal the working of the unconscious (both the Id and the Super-ego). Wish-fulfillment is a primary function of dreams, as is the working through of anxieties in symbolic form.

Displacement is when the psyche substitutes a new goal or object for a goal or object that the Super-ego finds unacceptable. Aggression toward an individual, for example, could turn into competition with him or her (beating the individual at a contest, rather than simply beating the individual with fists) . The verb form is *to displace*.

Sublimation is when the mind re-channels psychic energy into more socially acceptable forms. This is how the instinctual responses of the Id become productive, as when, for example, sexual energy is *sublimed* into creativity.

Repression is when the Super-ego submerges ideas and feeling that cause discomfort and anxiety into the Id. This is perfectly healthy; for instance, feelings like grief or heartache grow numb over time. It can become pathological, however.



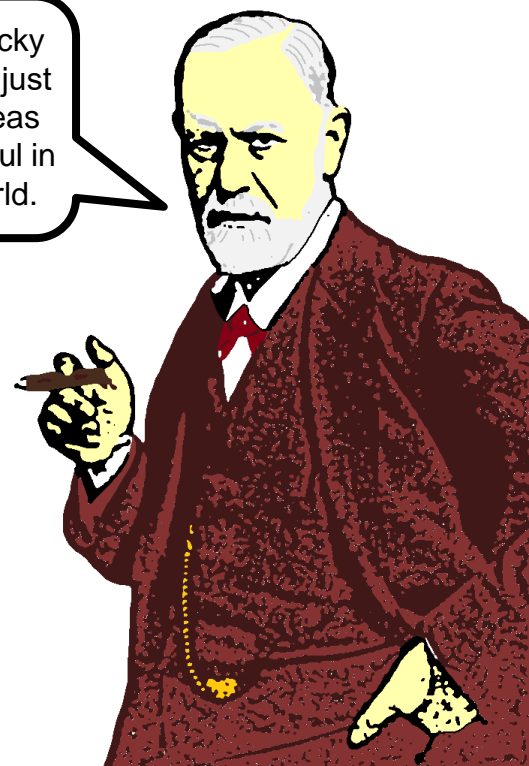
What about the Rest of What Freud Believed?

A lot of what Freud theorized is no longer terribly relevant to modern psychology, either as a concept or even as a literary metaphor. He was incredibly prolific, and he had a wide-ranging mind that led him to speculate in many fields. Freud was a very idiosyncratic individual who often spoke with absolute authority on ideas that had little basis in scientific the method. He was also a person of his time, with many of the same prejudices and limitations.

Among the many things that it's best to ignore include the idea of penis envy in women (sexist nonsense), an Oedipal stage of development whereby male children enter into barely sublimed sexual competition with their fathers for the affections of their mother (you'll find very few convinced by this reasoning today), a self-destructive "death drive" (absolute nonsense from an evolutionary standpoint), and his stages of childhood development (which never had much empirical support anyway).

His idea of the unconscious mind, however, remains vital.

I said lots of wacky stuff. It's best to just focus on the ideas that are still useful in the modern world.



Common Misunderstandings

Students often confuse the Ego with the Super-ego, conflating *being logical* with *being moral*. Perhaps it is because they don't like to see their conscious mind as fundamentally self-centered, or perhaps it is because they know that the Ego is the opposite of the Id (though this is based on reason and chaos, not on good and evil). Whatever the case, remember that *egotism* is a negative trait, and you'll have a clearer idea about Freud's intentions here.

A related problem are students who perceive the Super-ego as being the personification of goodness. Quite frankly, my *angel and devil on the shoulder* analogy isn't helping (like all analogies, it breaks down at some point). Remember, though, that the Super-ego is completely judgmental and irrational (you are *never* good enough). Without a conscience, we'd either be an unreasoning brute (the Id) or a psychopath (the Ego). At the same time, a Super-ego that demands more than is realistic is pathological. This is why psychotherapy often tries to expose the unconscious portions of the Super-ego, so that the conscious mind can evaluate its demands in a more reasonable light.

A final problem is the failure to understand that all three portions of the psyche are essential. Pathology occurs when a healthy balance is not maintained. We need instinctual energy, a bit of reasonable selfishness, *and* a sense of morality.