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The Sub-Ego: Description of An Inferior Observing Agency[1]

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01 Gods, Young and Old

In his *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus of Rotterdam has the allegorical heroine pose a typically foolish, yet also extremely clever, question: "Why is Cupid always pourtrai'd like a boy?" (Erasmus 1913, p. 28) This question as to the reason for the everlasting childishness of godly figures refers to a particular phenomenon in cultural history: cultures other than our own—yes, even the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome that we like to refer to—had young, childlike gods. As is known, ancient cultures also worshiped other deities that had but few similarities with the gods familiar to us. Theirs were extravagant, lascivious, adulterous, jealous, vain, wrathful, and even drunken gods and goddesses—thus, by and large, characters with infantile or suboptimal affect management. This was occasionally considered scandalous even by some ancient philosophers;[2] and it had led some nineteenth-

[1] An earlier, German version of this text appeared in my book *Erwachsenensprache. Über Ihr Verschwinden aus Politik und Kultur* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 2017). Courtesy of the publisher.

[2] Xenophanes, the "monotheistic" pre-Socratic philosopher, critically remarked: "Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything that is a shame and reproach among men, stealing, committing adultery, and deceiving each other." (Xenophanes of Colophon, Frgm. 11; Sextus, Adv. Math., IX, 193; see Kirk and Raven 1957, pp. 168 ff.)

century scholars to doubt whether the Greeks really had believed in their gods.[3]

Not all religions even have gods, as Émile Durkheim established (Durkheim 1995, pp. 27 ff). But when a religion or culture does have gods, then a certain cultural-historical regularity can be observed: The older the culture, the younger its gods. Or more precisely: The younger a culture, the more likely it is that its gods be exclusively old, wise, disembodied, nearly genderless, and, in any case, asexual.

Even in Christianity, that is, in its older version, Catholicism, the traces of ancient, infantile deities can still be recognized in chubby-cheeked little angels, while, at least in the saints, striking gender differences are manifest. In Protestantism, as the more recent version of Christianity, however, an animosity toward the image developed, most certainly first and foremost due to Protestantism's desire to purge itself of this inherited personnel stemming from classical antiquity.[4] Following Theo Sundermeier, Jan Assmann's differentiation between "primary religions," which fear that the sacred might not be recognized and worshiped enough, and "secondary religions," which fear the opposite, that is, respecting the sacred too much (Assmann 2003, p. 11), can probably be traced back to this circumstance. For what is at issue here is not only the sacral quantity, but mainly an endeavor to ban from culture everything that is sexual and affective about the saints. In a fine observation, Sigmund Freud got to the heart of this cultural development that separates us from classical antiquity:

[3] See Veyne 1988, and Engels' clever reply to this in Engels 1973, p. 14. See also Pfaller 2014, pp. 6 f.

[4] The "genius," to whom Giorgio Agamben devoted a powerful study (Agamben 2007), is also one of these childlike gods with whom it is never very easy to get along. His keen removal from the world of art since the 1990s through diverse initiatives, such as conceptual art and documentary art, are evidence of that fanatical Protestant spirit, which, as Max Weber accurately remarked, is unaware of its religious nature (Weber 2002 [1905], p. 216).

> The most striking distinction between the erotic life of antiquity and our own no doubt lies in the fact that the ancients laid the stress upon the instinct itself, whereas we emphasize its object. The ancients glorified the instinct and were prepared on its account to honour even an inferior object; while we despise the instinctual activity in itself, and find excuses for it only in the merits of the object. (Freud 2001a [1905], p. 149 n.)

02 Gods, Complementary and Aligned

If it is true that people create gods based on their own image, as Epicurus, Spinoza, and Ludwig Feuerbach claimed, then psychoanalysis should probably add a small clarification here: they create the gods based on a desired image of themselves, rather than a realistic one. People want to correspond with a certain image, and configure their gods in accordance with that. However, in doing so, the gods can assume different functions and configurations. They can take on those parts of the personality and affect features that people themselves no longer have, or refuse to accept—"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," as Freud summarizes this model.[5] Here, one can speak of "complementary deifying." Like the State later, the gods are assigned certain monopolies on violence, games of fortune, and affects.

[5] "A progressive renunciation of constitutional instincts, whose activation might afford the ego primary pleasure, appears to be one of the foundations of the development of human civilization. Some part of this instinctual repression is effected by its religions, in that they require the individual to sacrifice his instinctual pleasure to the Deity: 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' In the development of the ancient religions one seems to discern that many things which mankind had renounced as 'iniquities' had been surrendered to the Deity and were still permitted in his name, so that the handing over to him of bad and socially harmful instincts was the means by which man freed himself from their domination. For this reason, it is surely no accident that all the attributes of man, along with the misdeeds that follow from them, were to an unlimited amount ascribed to the ancient gods. Nor is it a contradiction of this that nevertheless man was not permitted to justify his own iniquities by appealing to divine example." (Freud 2001b [1907], p. 127)

Subsequently, however, people seem to no longer want to allow the gods what they painstakingly deny themselves. The gods then become as wise, peaceful, good—and as old—as the people themselves aspire to be, at least potentially, or that is at least what they hope for in an agency that, so they believe, passes judgement on them. "Analogue deification" removes the complementary function of beings situated on the Olympus, or in heaven, and arranges for a strict orientation of gods and people along the same norms.

Of course, the gods conceived as complimentary, that is, the gods who had to take on all of the follies of humanity as their own,[6] were not unproblematic companions for the inhabitants of ancient times either. Older cultures did not differ from our culture in that they considered things that appear repulsive to us as good *per se*. Instead, as Freud explained, they were aware of the ambivalent nature of the gods, while we attempt to deny or eliminate this ambivalence. The ancients, by contrast, had methods for realizing the benign aspects of this ambivalence. As Freud's quoted remark about "glorifying the instinct" ("*Feiern des Triebes*," literally: "celebrating the drive") reveals, in this regard "celebrating" was the definitive cultural technique. One has to celebrate or sanctify the (disquieting) gods, as then they do not appear as something impure, but

[6] "'How foolish they are' is what he thinks when the mortals misbehave, – 'foolishness', 'stupidity', a little 'mental disturbance', this much even the Greeks of the strongest, bravest period *allowed* themselves as a reason for much that was bad or calamitous: – foolishness, *not* sin! you understand? … But even this mental disturbance was a problem – 'Yes, how is this possible? Where can this have actually come from with minds like *ours*, we men of high lineage, happy, well-endowed, high-born, noble and virtuous?' – for centuries, the noble Greek asked himself this in the face of any incomprehensible atrocity or crime with which one of his peers had sullied himself. 'A *god* must have confused him', he said to himself at last, shaking his head … This solution is *typical* for the Greeks … In this way, the gods served to justify man to a certain degree, even if he was in the wrong they served as causes of evil – they did not, at that time, take the punishment on themselves, but rather, as is *nobler*, the guilt …" (Nietzsche 2007 [1887], p. 65)

rather—based on the dual meaning[7] as recognized by Freud and Benveniste—as magnificent, lofty, sublime. In everyday life, traces of this cultural technique can still be observed today, albeit without explicit reference to the holy ones or gods: for example, when people gather and festively enjoy an unusually sumptuous meal ("a real pig out"), a "bad taste party," or an otherwise "accursed"[8] or shunned part of trivial culture (as, for instance, in the case of the methods of "camp" culture described by Susan Sontag) and thereby transform it into what for them is a sublime experience.[9] With regard to the gods, these techniques seem to have been lost early on in our culture—a process similar to the disappearing of ambivalent pleasures in the past several decades. In this way, a great deal of what we were previously able to celebrate now appears repulsive to us; and thus, our previous gods become our demons, as Freud remarked with reference to Heinrich Heine (Freud 2001d [1919], pp. 235 ff).

03 Observation, from Above and from Below

This cultural development is of interest for psychoanalysis not only because it brings with it a changed relationship to the affects. The gods were not merely role models or afterimages of people, but also allegories for the elements of the human psyche—they symbolized the observational and judgmental agencies accommodated therein. Whether a culture is one of old or young gods, gods with or without drives, is relevant in terms of the direction from which people feel

[7] Benveniste remarked that in almost all Indo-European languages, two notions are always to be found for these matters; for example, in English "holy" and "sacred." Freud noted the striking ambivalence in the Polynesian notion of "taboo" that means, on the one hand, "sublime, holy," and "filthy," on the other. See Benveniste 2016, pp. 453 ff; Freud 2001c [1912–13], p. 18.

[8] For the notion of the "accursed share" in culture, see Bataille 1993.

[9] In my opinion, therein lies the precise theoretical meaning of the Freudian term "sublimation" (see Pfaller 2009).

observed and judged in their self-assessment.[10] Cultures with old gods who seem superior to people with regard to all moral criteria, feel observed from above. Freud's term "super-ego" seems to correspond with this observational position that achieved dominance late in cultural history. In light of the handed down young gods, however, psychoanalysis has to draw the conclusion that yet another type of observation is possible—an observation from below. For this agency, the "sub-ego" seems an appropriate description. In contrast to Freud's concept of the "Id," which identifies no observing function for this agency, a "sub-ego" would acknowledge that also towards this side, the psyche has to cope with not only instinctual drives, but also normative demands and judgments.[11]

One could pointedly say that in the ancient world it was not people who believed in gods, but rather the reverse, it was gods who believed in people: for the sake of the childlike ancient gods, people had to do things that they would have otherwise refused to do for themselves. For example, they felt obliged to provide entertainment for these (otherwise easily bored) beings through elaborate sporting and artistic Olympic competitions. And by celebrating and dancing, they were meant to put on a cheerful and happy face—maybe even a bit more cheerful and happy than they actually were. A similar, well-known imperative still exists today

[10] On these judgment-functions and their various manifestations in cultural history, see Nietzsche's remark: "These Greeks, for most of the time, used their Gods, expressly to keep 'bad conscience' at bay so that they could carry on enjoying their freedom of soul: therefore, the opposite of the way Christendom made use of its God." (Nietzsche 2007 [1887], pp. 64–65)

[11] This would probably also help the term "agency" to attain its full rights. With it, Freud's "topological" differentiation would first achieve what differentiations are supposed to—namely, to distinguish things of the same nature: in this case, observing agencies. Otherwise, the psychoanalytical topology risks similar theoretical aberrations as classical political economy with its "trinity formula" of wealth ("capital—land—labor"), which Karl Marx ridiculed as making just about as much sense as the differentiation between "lawyer's fees, beetroot and music" (Marx 1991, p. 953; for a succinct commentary, see Brewer 1984, p. 181).

in the practice of politeness. Here, too, one should simulate a good mood, benevolence, and well-being, even if perhaps in reality (or what one thinks is such) one is in an entirely different mood. It is as though a naïve, virtual observing agency's belief in people's appearances should not be disappointed.

04 Insight and Hindsight

Strangely, the fact that normative, and not simply factual (i.e., instinctual), demands emanate from inferior agencies is all too easily overlooked in our culture. Yet it is legible in many forms of behavior. In the face of particular observers assessed as naïve, people refrain from enjoying some things that they would otherwise absolutely grant themselves. For example, some people do not smoke in the presence of children; not simply to avoid afflicting them with toxic substances, but also to avoid being perceived as bad role models. Others pretend to be religious, or send their children to religious schools, despite being indifferent towards religion or even rejecting it. Adult "Others," too, can end up in this alleged observing position. The saying "What will people think?" sums up a great deal what, on the surface, can only be understood as a demand for manners located somewhere below.[12] In contrast to the more strongly internalized moral demands, nearly everything that is done so as to look good in the eyes of others—that is, all that is done for the sake of appearances, such as elegant or civilized looks, etiquette, being chic, etc.—must be described in

[12] Also belonging to this category are things that fall under sayings such as "one says," or "one wears this nowadays," or even "one might believe" (see the characteristic saying for the illusion of the game *"on dirait"*—"one could say"—in Mannoni 1985, p. 162). The "one" here is always of the sort that Martin Heidegger, in his notion of *"das 'Man'"*, "the They," situated with scorn (see Heidegger 1993, pp. 113 ff)—in relation to the I, this agency is localized as an inferior, "naïve observer" (see Pfaller 2014).

terms of demands on the part of an agency that is ignorant and only capable of perceiving formalities, yet nonetheless felt as being in control.[13] An important difference becomes apparent here: the demands that come from above, although not always considered fulfillable (in the sense of the Kantian maxim "Ought implies can"), are nonetheless always seen as meaningful. They are, so to speak, "ego syntonic." On the contrary, the demands from below are perceived as "ego dystonic." They clearly boil down to what causes the behavior of splitting of the ego described by Octave Mannoni, and summarized by the saying "I know well, but all the same..." (Mannoni 1985, pp. 9 ff). While in the attempt by the ego to meet these respective demands its behavior towards the upper side can be described as one of "realizing" and "obeying," the norm-conforming behavior towards the lower side is most certainly one of yielding and indulgent connivance. In the first case, people look up towards something and, by obeying, gain self-esteem, while in the second case they perhaps shake their head, maybe utter an affectionate chuckle, or even become fearful as they let something happen for which they have absolutely no understanding.[14] That is why Freud's comparison of the non-justifiable prohibitions of "taboo societies" to Kant's absolute categorical imperative is misleading (see Freud 2001c [1912–13], p. 292). Kant's imperative is a command from a human reason that makes the laws with which every reasonable being must be able to identify. The prohibitions of the taboos, on the contrary, cannot be justified and cannot be identified with because they are

[13] See Immanuel Kant's and Richard Sennett's descriptions of the necessity of theatrical appearance in the public space (Kant 1974 [1798], p. 442 (§ 11); Sennett 2002 [1974], pp. 49 ff).

[14] The two faces of this domain belong, as Freud remarked, to the uncanny and the comedic (see Pfaller 2008, pp. 251–72). The typical gaze of Cary Grant in comedies such as Blake Edwards' *Operation Pettycoat* (1959) describes precisely this attitude of an amazed and amused, entirely fatalistic acceptance along the lines of "I know well, but all the same..."

not issued from above, but instead come from what is basically an ego-dystonic below.

05 What We Can Laugh About Fondly

In his study on humor, Freud remarked that a humorous attitude can most definitely be adopted with regard to one's self (one could perhaps even say that this is proof of someone having a good sense of humor in the first place), and that this asset requires a relationship between two different upper-level stages of one's own psyche. As Freud explains:

> [S]omeone is treating himself like a child and is at the same time playing the part of a superior adult towards that child[.] (Freud 2001e [1927], p. 164)

Through this reference to an agency that is viewed as a child, it becomes possible to recognize "the triviality of interests and sufferings which seem so great to it" and to smile at them (ibid., p. 163). Subsequently, Freud attempted to topologically define this gaze as the gaze of the super-ego looking upon the ego. After all, this surprising, affectionate attitude of the super-ego would not contradict its "origin in the paternal agency" (ibid., p. 166).

On the other hand, as Freud himself remarked, this theoretical step nonetheless appears a bit paradoxical. "In other connections we knew the super-ego as a severe master" (ibid.), Freud writes, adding that while this master is, indeed, strict, he is anything but just. The super-ego always punishes, regardless of whether one obeys it or not, and punishes us even more strictly when we obey it (see Freud 2001f [1930], p. 126). And when one experiences misfortune due to no fault of one's own, this master shows no sympathy whatsoever, instead intensifying its pressure on us. This double paradox, noted by Freud, reveals that by nature the

super-ego is a dangerous tyrant, who only in the most favorable cases can be swayed from harassing the ego with obscene double-binds. The origins of the super-ego in the parental agency is—also in Freud's opinion—likewise no proof of its ability for affectionate leniency. On the contrary, as Freud determined: the milder the parents, the stricter the super-ego, as its role models are not the parents, but instead, their super-egos (Freud 2001g [1933], p. 67).

Beyond that, Freud remarked "that, in bringing about the humorous attitude, the super-ego is actually repudiating reality and serving an illusion" (Freud 2001e [1927], p. 166). Yet, on the other hand, Freud had just established the super-ego as representative of the reality principle (Freud 2001h [1921], p. 114). These inconsistencies can perhaps be resolved by defining, as Freud does, the humorous attitude as a gaze from above directed down below, but, unlike Freud, not conceiving it as a gaze of the super-ego onto the ego. In his topology that conceives of no other observing agencies Freud only had one candidate that could possibly fill this position of the gaze from above, namely the super-ego.

However, once we assume (instructed by the image of the childlike gods) that there are also inferior observing agencies, we can discern yet another type of the gaze from above. Accordingly, we too could gaze downward affectionately when entering into a relationship with the sub-ego. When relating to ourselves in a humorous way, we put ourselves in the position of the sub-ego; we look at ourselves the way that we otherwise tend to do with the other placeholders of this agency. And our leniency with regard to the shortcomings of this inferior being, who could also be us, would therefore rest on the fact that we have learned to also please beings whom we consider less perceptive than ourselves. What seems to agree with this hypothesis is the situation still observable today, namely that we find a more humorous, as well as a more affectionate, relationship with children in cultures that have distinctly preserved the memory of childlike gods.

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