

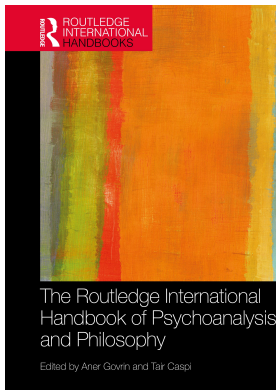
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THE PSYCHOANALYTIC *DAS ICH*

Lost in Translation

Alfred I. Tauber

The Problem

The English *Standard Edition* of Freud's works introduced translations that have purportedly altered basic understanding of psychoanalytic theory. Most prominent among the disputed meanings concerns the construal of Freud's use of '*das Ich*' – 'the I.' Some have maintained that translating 'the I' as 'the ego' introduces a semantic distortion with a host of issues embedding ambiguities in discerning Freud's intent and the development of his thought. The question is hardly trivial given that the very character of the psychoanalytic subject is at stake in this debate. So, when new English translations were prepared upon the *Standard Edition's* copyright expiration in 1989, some of the translators made adjustments in answer to wide-ranging criticisms (Hawkins 2018).¹

Although discussed earlier, the issue gained prominence in the 1980s as 'self psychology' emerged from 'ego psychology' and the orthodoxy of Freudian psychoanalysis underwent a major trial. The defense argued for the prior convention of 'ego' in the English translation of German that carries an implicit understanding: The Freudian subject is the individual who has the sense of experiencing his/her 'I-ness' (i.e., subjectivity; Solms 1999). Some have argued that Freud differentiates various meanings of the subject and much is inevitably lost in translation given the subtleties of his original style. In any case, irrespective of such concerns, the prevailing position argues that *ego* is capable of representing the different senses of the subject.² So, by common assent, given the strength of the *Standard Edition's* use of the 'ego,' the issue is moot, for the English translation has assumed an authority freed from the German original (Ornston 1982; Wilson 1987).

In opposition, critics hold (noting Freud's meticulous use of language) that his word choice of '*das Ich*' is deliberate. He might have used *ego*, inasmuch as it was introduced in the mid-19th century in psychology and was explicitly used in the literature on hysteria by the last decade (Clarke 1894, p. 130).³ However, from his earliest clinical writings to his last summary statements, Freud conspicuously omits *ego* or *Selbst* (self) to designate the subject.⁴ When *self* rarely appears in the English *Standard Edition*, it is misappropriated. Indeed, selfhood considered in any formal sense escaped Freud's interest. Instead of reference to a self or ego, he employed the pronominal – s/he, you, I. Accordingly, the counter-position argues that 'ego' (among other mis-translations) misconstrues and thus distorts Freud's intent despite

his approval of the term.⁵ James Strachey, the principal translator and editor of the English *Standard Edition*, has been accused of obscuring Freud's humanism for a falsified scientism; by using Latinized terminology, strengthening the medical orientation and thus 'hardening' Freud's tentative prose into firm theoretical claims; and in too many instances employing idiosyncratic translations to support his own purposes, specifically, imposing his own interpretation of Freud's notion of conscious agency to serve as a foundation for a scientific-oriented psychoanalytic theory.

Although Strachey took responsibility for translating the so-called 'technical terms' and in regard to *das Ich*, he worked with the Glossary Committee led by Ernest Jones and Joan Riviere. They insisted on using 'ego' and 'id' instead of 'the I' and 'the It,' favored by James and Alix Strachey, John Rickman and Leonard Woolf. The exchange is noteworthy (as reported by Strachey to his wife):

The little beast [Jones] . . . is really most irritating. . . . They want to call "das Es" "the Id." I said I thought everyone would say "the Yidd."

So Jones said there was no such word in English: 'There's "Yiddish," you know. And in German "Jude." But there is no such word as "Yidd."

'Pardon me, doctor. "Yidd" is a current slang word for a Jew.'

'Ah! A slang expression. It cannot be in very widespread use then.'

Simply because that l.b. [little beast] hasn't ever heard of it.

(Ornston 1992).⁶

And from that brief exchange, the entire matter was settled for better and for worse.

Of course, dissenters are substituting their own translations in the context of a complex agenda.⁷ The dispute rests on a broader view of psychoanalysis that evolved as the post-Freudians asserted their own theoretical interests. *Ego* routinely appears later in the writings of the ego psychologists, who shifted from Freud's focus on the theory of the unconscious psyche to the psychological adjustments of the self-conscious subject of analysis.⁸ With the introduction of Heinz Kohut's object relations theory in the 1970s, an explicit 'psychology of the self' was expounded. Although Kohut failed to provide a definition of the self that sat at the center of his theory (Kohut 1977, pp. 310–311), the ordinary meanings of *ego* and *self* became operative in the psychoanalytic literature as analysts turned to the broad concerns of development and adaptation of the individual.⁹ And here we find the tension that lies at the base of the *das Ich*/ego controversy: Despite Freud skirting the psychology of what came to be called, 'the ego,' his followers could not relinquish the search for a latent conception of one's selfhood that lies at the base of his theory.¹⁰

The ready (and general) acceptance of *ego* for the knowing subject attests to its semantic and psychological standing. But it is inescapable that Freud himself consistently relinquished its use in his original writings and was satisfied with the implicit uses and meanings of *das Ich*. He says so himself: in 1926, Freud published a summary of psychoanalytic theory for a lay audience, *The Question of Lay Analysis*. There, he specifically addresses the use of *das Ich* (and *das Es* – the it) in contrast to 'choosing orotund Greek nouns' to describe the mind's functional domains (Freud 1926a, p. 195). He then affirms that :

we take our stand upon the ground of popular wisdom and recognize in human beings a mental organization inserted between sensory stimuli and their perception of bodily needs on the one hand, and their motor actions on the other, and for a certain purpose negotiating between them. We call this organization the I. But this is nothing new; everybody assumes such an organization as long as they aren't philosophers, and some do even though they are philosophers

(Freud 1926b, p. 105).

Freud goes on to explain that for his patients' sake, non-technical terms are being used, inasmuch as 'they need to understand our theories, and they are often very intelligent but not always highly educated' (ibid. p. 106).

Freud is undoubtedly correct in specifying that psychoanalysis is about elucidating 'mental organization,' for his *scientific* interest lies in dissecting the mind and discerning its functions. And with that theoretical focus, the subject *qua* the subjective becomes a secondary matter. Of course, *Dr. Freud*, the physician, was oriented by his patient's suffering and an implicit sense of I-ness the analysand experiences. Here, humanistic elements come into play. However, *Prof. Freud*, the scientist, develops his theory without confounding issues about consciousness and accompanying subjective states. And here we find the root of the terminology debate. In the space that opens between his scientific interests and the subjectivity of his patient, a gap appears, or perhaps a tension emerges. For Freud's interpretive method, the subjective serves primarily as the portal into the depths of the psyche. The subjective 'surface' would be pierced by an analysis to reveal the underbelly of feelings, self-awareness, and conflict. Later, the post-Freudians who practiced 'ego psychology' focused on the development and adjustment of this *experiential* I. Accordingly, in rescuing the subjective *me* from the objectified mental apparatus drawn from Freud's scientific presentation, the phenomenology of the personal gained prominence. And with this evolution of psychoanalytic practice, the embedded subjective/objective division was exposed to display the fundamental dispute about the character of the discipline.

A semantic distinction would have been useful to clarify the issues and refine the arguments of different orientations. Using the same terminology to capture two competing agendas obscures the underlying philosophical commitments of each point of view. Because Freud made no effort to eliminate the crossover of meanings that appear repeatedly in his writings, his readers must rely on the context of the discussion to discern his thought. The *Standard Edition* similarly made no effort to distinguish the various meanings of the subject by using *ego* in both contexts. This inattention leads to an intriguing philosophical issue, one that Freud scrupulously avoided, but nevertheless erupted in the *das Ich*/ego controversy: *Who* is the psychoanalytic subject, and how should she be regarded?

The Freudian Subject

The success of psychoanalysis depends on self-awareness in various contexts (traumatic memory, social interactions, self-appraisals, etc.). Indeed, the underlying premise that emotional recognition and rational insight leads to personal freedom makes self-consciousness the linchpin of psychological and existential health. Because Freud does not explicitly consider the character of self-consciousness – the 'relation of oneself to oneself' – he ironically left the introspective subject uncharacterized. Although he admits that self-consciousness is an 'accomplishment' of sorts (Tugendhat 1986, p. 127), Freud dismissed the need to probe the nature of consciousness and took it as given and thus assumed its immediacy – and reality. His interests lay elsewhere. As he explained in his *New Introductory Lectures*, 'There is no need to discuss what is to be called conscious: it is removed from all doubt' (Freud 1933, p. 70). And more specifically, Freud's critical evaluation of self-reflection remained peripheral to his theoretical interests. He accepted the analysand's memory (albeit screened, repressed and thus contorted), at least to the extent that it offered the basis for analysis.¹¹ For Freud, at least, remembrance *as given* – whether 'true' or not – was sufficient for his purposes. And, in bypassing self-consciousness as a warrant of interest, he abdicated efforts to seriously examine the modes of self-identification and self-reflection that define the analysand's *das Ich* or sense of self. This is an ironic move. After all, the analysand's subjectivity is the substrate for the work of psychoanalysis, but only in the aftermath

of orthodox Freudianism did ego and self-psychologies directly address *me* as the object of clinical intervention.

In this regard, Freud remained the erstwhile scientist. In his mature thought, *das Ich* is characterized not by a sense of self, but as a locus of three functions: (1) a coherent organization of mental processes, (2) an assembly of defenses that mediate the competing demands of unconscious desire and social reality and (3) the construction of multiple identifications (Freud 1923).¹² This is a structural-functional psychological model that eschews, in its theoretical description, what may be captured as the sense of *me*. Simply, Freud's focus on the agency of the unconscious (the drives, primary processes) left the self-conscious subject in abeyance. Moreover, because the analysand only carries a phenomenological identity, unencumbered by implicit notions about personal identity, the schematized *ego* is a designation of a technical terminology with specific categorical meanings. As a neuro-anatomist, Freud followed the accepted paradigm of his era to present a model of the brain's structure-function relations, an erstwhile objective formulation far removed from the subjectivity of his patient. He would probe beneath the manifest person, the I of the self-aware, to describe the unconscious dynamics of the psyche in his quest for a science of the mind.

We may well ponder, again, *who* or *what* is *das Ich*? Freud was satisfied with the simple designation of 'I' – unencumbered with the diverse constructions associated with ego or self so dominant in the philosophy and psychology literatures. He held no commitment to some totality of personal identity, and thus he remained satisfied with a commonsensical notion of personhood. Taking this assumed position, he addressed his patient by the ordinary 'you,' 'he,' or 'she.' On this pragmatic view, the 'I' simply serves as a useful idiom to capture the voice of the interior. But what is the relation between such a conscious voice and the inexpressible, a-rational mental interior? Or in the specifics of psychoanalytic theory, where do repression and catharsis operate, and how are controls imposed?

On the one hand, psychoanalysis provides the self-aware subject a means of autonomous interpretation, where rationality confers (some limited) authority over inner drives and desires. Such a subject possesses the ability to survey objects of its own intention, which, in the case of Freudian psychoanalysis, is the intimate other – the unconscious. From that understanding, the analysand putatively obtains various degrees of freedom from the despotic a-rationality of libidinal drives. Here, the modernist model of an autonomous subject finds its full expression (Taylor 1989; Seigel 2005; Thiel 2014), and when placing Freud in this philosophical setting, we clearly see that he struggled to find an interpretive analytic for his new psychiatry of personal liberation. Committed to the ideals of reason's power, the perfection of humankind, and, from the vantage of a physician, the therapeutic promise of analysis, Freud embraced a meliorism moderated by a powerful ambivalence (Freud 1933, p. 171; Whitebook 1995; Tauber 2012).

On the other hand, that depiction is placed in opposition to the subject with no such authority and (unless enlightened) ignorant of those unconscious despotic forces. Acknowledging the limits of self-consciousness, the inability to 'reason' with the unconscious and the creation of psychic reality from the throes of unrequited desire, Freud portrayed the human subject much as Plato had in the *Phaedrus* (246a–254e) – like a charioteer holding in check two steeds, each vying to go his own way. The basic design of the psychoanalytic mind presents a reality organized by intentional desire (conscious and unconscious) mediated by a social-derived normative rationality. The line between fantasy and reality is no longer something like the difference between a mental event and a 'real' event in some simple sense. Moreover, reason plays only one part among other contributing faculties to create the mental world in which one lives. With the status of self-knowing precariously lodged between desire and the demands of reality, skepticism finds its home. What can one know about his or her very own desire and motivations that rationalize choice and action? Given this dichotomy, *Who am I?* demands complex consideration of

how unconscious forces define *agency* (the forces driving choices and actions) and impact the self-knowing, conscious *subject* (Moran 1993).

The analysand is poised between scrutinizing her agency as some kind of ‘other’ and then turning self-consciously to reflect on her own subjectivity arising from those psychic depths. *Das Ich* is not coincident with the subject, and in fact it is precisely in the difference between the two that one begins to be able to discern the creation of a new conceptual entity: the psychoanalytic subject (Ogden 1992, p. 572).¹³

Freudian theory thus splits the knowing (conscious) *subject* from the *agent*, the locus of psychic determinative control of thought, words, and deeds (Moran 1993). This division highlights an unresolved dilemma of Freudian theory: *Who* is the true who – the voice of the self-conscious subject or the psychic apparatus? Freud answered, the unconscious was the ‘true psychic reality’ (Freud 1900, p. 5:613). By that, Groddeck fairly observed,

I hold the view that man is animated by the Unknown, that there is within him an ‘Es,’ an ‘It,’ some wonderous force that directs both what he himself does, and what happens to him. The affirmation ‘I live,’ is only conditionally correct, it expresses on a small and superficial part of the fundamental principle, ‘Man is lived by the It.’

(Groddeck 1976, Letter II)¹⁴

Yet, the dynamics of exchange, the defenses, repression and all the other proposed mechanics makes the conscious self responsible for keeping the psychic house in order. However, psychoanalytic theory reverses the hierarchy of the mind. What seems rational control is but misplaced confidence where ignorance and fantasy rule.

While Freud recognized the necessity of a ‘dialogue’ of sorts between conscious mentation and unconscious drives, his theoretical concerns were focused upon the dynamics and effects of the latter (Ogden 1992). After all, the central tenet of psychoanalysis held that

the unconscious is the true psychical reality; in its inner most nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is incompletely presented by the data of consciousness as is the external world by its communications of our sense organs

(Freud 1900, p. 613).

This basic concept displaced consciousness and its attendant notions of the knowing agency as comprising *me* with revolutionary consequences: Freud repeatedly asserts that free will is an illusion, that humans are unconsciously directed by deterministic unconscious forces, and the ‘true’ *Ich* is *Es*.

So then, *who* is the *das Ich* Freud cites – Man or *das Es*? And more generally, is psychoanalysis about the conscious *I* or the unconscious *it*? When stated as an unadorned opposition, a synthesis beckons, for psychoanalysis does in fact regard the subject in both ways, but unresolved ambiguities accompany this division of the psyche. What is the role of conscious awareness within the context of unconscious psychic dynamics? How are arational forces linked to the self-reflective individual? How is rational insight transmuted into analytic cure? What, indeed, is the proper balance between the two domains of mental life, between erotic desire and social reality? (e.g., Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 1993; Marcuse 1955; Brown 1959).

The basic schism of agency embedded in Freud’s theory already appears clearly in *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), where the psychic processes he described are ‘devoid of a subject; they simply operate within the subject,’ thus leaving an unaccounted gap between *das Ich* and the unconscious domain (Moran 1993, pp. 48–50). In his later writings, best developed in *The Ego and Id* (1923), Freud blurs the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious domains by placing *das Ich* straddling the boundaries and engaged in a repressed/repressing dynamic. And

with *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud makes one last stab at finding the missing connections between the conscious subject and the agency of the unconscious:

Normally, there is nothing of which we are more certain than the feeling of our self [Selbst!], of our own ego [das Ich]. This ego [das Ich] appears to us as something autonomous and unitary, marked off distinctly from everything else. That such an appearance is deceptive, and that on the contrary the ego [das Ich] is continued inwards, without any sharp delimitation, into an unconscious mental entity which we designate as the id [Es] and for which it serves as a kind of façade – this was a discovery first made by psycho-analytic research, which should still have much more to tell us about the relation of the ego [das Ich] to the id [Es].

(Freud 1930, pp. 65–66)

This passage reveals Freud's own appreciation of the split subject: The first two sentences assert the reality and immediacy of the sense of one own self, one's intimate subjectivity. He then shifts to objectifying this *I* in asserting the relationship of this conscious subjectivity with its unconscious components. Note, *das Ich* is used in both discourses – subjective and objective – and thus Freud embeds two meanings in the same terminology. When the analysand lies on the couch, the subjective 'I' becomes an object of analysis, an 'ego' defined by psychoanalytic theory. A distinguishing terminology would make these two points of view explicit and thereby clarify the character of the subject. And beyond the particularities of Freud's writings, the duality points to a larger philosophical conundrum opened for inspection.

A Philosophical Perspective

Reflexivity appeared as a way of self-understanding during the early modern period, which is hardly surprisingly considering the pre-occupation with optics on the one hand, and cognitive introspection on the other. 'Reflexive' as used to refer to 'thought as bending back upon itself' first appears in the 1640s, when theologians, philosophers and poets embarked on an introspective inquiry only to 'stop' at some point to re-direct consciousness into the world. And at the same time, 'conscious' as meaning 'inwardly sensible or aware' appears first in 1620, 'consciousness' or 'the state of being conscious' in 1678, and 'self-consciousness' or 'consciousness of one's thoughts, etc.' in 1690. In German the equivalent terms are found in the same period (Whyte 1978, pp. 42–43). Reflexivity formally enters the philosophical tradition with Descartes' division of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*: In his scheme, the Latinized *ego* became the seat of the knowing agent and the epistemological base from which he launched the attack on skepticism. However, Descartes' self-assurance that he *knew* that he thought is insufficient to make the jump that the self-conscious subject has substantive knowledge of *what* that 'thinking thing' is, or as later critics maintained, whether such 'self-knowledge' is *knowledge* at all. Simply, Descartes did not prove or substantiate his claim beyond what he had already presupposed (Chiesa 2007, p. 15).

The basic problem, as first noted by Henry Jeanes (an obscure English minister, 1611–1662), is the infinite regress encoded in reflexivity, where 'the mind in its reflexive workings can proceed *in infinitum*' and, consequently, a definable bedrock of the ego's *is-ness* cannot be held as some object (Jeanes 1656, p. 42; quoted by *Oxford English Dictionary* vol. Q, 1971: 345).¹⁵ This position was firmly established by Hume, who famously observed that instead of the Cartesian ego, he found a 'bundle . . . of different perceptions,' and opined that its handmaiden, consciousness, is only the piecemeal aggregate of those perceptions – fragmentary, often incoherent, frequently rationally disordered, and powerfully driven by the 'passions' (Hume 1978, p. 252).

Hume did not deny the sense of self, but he dismissed the notion of a self insofar as it is accessible through inner empirical experience (i.e., consisting only of perceptions). Simply, for him, it is an imaginary construct, a fiction that permits the sense of an integrated identity, which is conceived by the same criteria we organize the world at large.¹⁶

Kant agreed and formulated a ‘solution’ with wide-ranging import, a construction Freud closely followed. Kant’s understanding of self-conscious awareness makes no claim about the functions of an ego – indeed, he does not postulate an ego as such (i.e., an entity) that performs this function. Instead, he was satisfied in establishing the necessary conditions for cognition that must cohere perceptual contents and thereby unify experience. He placed this synthesis as a necessary condition of all knowing and names that function of consciousness, the ‘transcendental unity of apperception’ (i.e., self-consciousness; Kant 1998, B138, p. 249; B140, p. 250).

The consciousness of oneself in accordance with the determinations of our state in internal perception is merely empirical, forever variable; it can provide no standing or abiding self in this stream of inner appearances, and is customarily called inner sense or empirical apperception

(Kant 1998, A107, p. 232).

As Béatrice Longuenesse explains,

Kant does not think that from the pure consciousness of oneself expressed in ‘I think,’ or more precisely, ‘I am thinking,’ one can derive any knowledge of the nature of the referent of ‘I.’ Nevertheless, ‘I think’ entails, for Kant just as for Descartes, ‘I exist.’ And for Kant, the consciousness of thinking expressed in ‘I think’ is a consciousness of myself as an ‘I, or he or it (the thing) that thinks,’ namely, as an entity that thinks and is individuated, for itself, by its consciousness of thinking. Thus . . . according to Kant, using ‘I’ in ‘I think’ expresses the consciousness of oneself as a particular entity (oneself, the entity currently thinking, whatever that entity is). . . . [U]sing ‘I’ in ‘I think’ is premised on nothing but the consciousness of a mental activity one takes to be one’s own in virtue of the fact that one takes oneself to be accountable for the correctness of its contents and their connections

(Longuenesse 2017, pp. 6–7).

Freud had imbibed the Kantian ethers and as a university student studied this formulation. Indeed, whether consciously or not, the Kantian model of the mind was firmly implanted in his own education (Tauber 2010). However, whatever indebtedness Freud might have had, he scrupulously avoided acknowledging Kant in the attempt to purge the specter of philosophy in his efforts to establish psychoanalysis as a scientific endeavor. Yet, much suggests that Freud accepted the cardinal feature of the transcendental deduction and like Kant, deliberately avoided *ego* and its trappings. As G.E.M. Anscombe explained,

the ‘I’ is not something that can be found as a mind or soul, a subject of consciousness, one among others; there is no such thing to be ‘found’ as the subject of consciousness in this sense. All that can be found is what consciousness is of, the contents of consciousness

(Anscombe 1959, p. 68).

In other words, there is a language of thought, and ‘I’ is the formal point of reference for it; that is, *I* then becomes a subject in the language of thought, in a language that places a subject in relation to an

object. And, by convention, the *I* may be split to become both the subject and the object of thought.¹⁷

The self-conscious first-person addresses ‘my’ inner state as in a third-person relationship, but always as an object lacking a defined ‘thinghood.’ So, when the *I* examines itself as both subject and object of its reflexivity, an endless recursion results (Tauber 2006). Because the representation of the Cartesian ego as a representation of itself is divided by its own self-consciousness, a gap appears between the ‘I’ of the ‘I think’ and the ‘I’ of the ‘I am,’ which follows as a logical conclusion from the ‘I think.’ That is to say, either these two ‘I’s’ are not the same thing or the second is already assumed in the positing of the first. Since ‘I think’ already entails the subject ‘I,’ the conclusion, ‘I am’ is strictly superfluous. Simply, the ego has been split and subjectivity swings between the self-consciousness of *I think* and the being of *I am*. And here are the origins of Wittgenstein’s later critique (and those of many others) of the ego – subjectivity, agency, and the self – that are based on self-knowledge, introspection and self-consciousness as qualified *knowledge* (Wittgenstein 1960, p. 66; reviewed in Tauber 2013). Accordingly, a false object of scrutiny has been created from a reflexive construction. False in the sense that there is no object to ‘see,’ to ‘know.’ Thus, the entire notion of a core ego – a homunculus – residing at the seat of one’s soul appears as an artifact of the human cognitive faculty.

Freud averted this result by finding an object at the core of the psyche, *das Es*, that the subject might examine, albeit indirectly. Through associations, transference and other modes of disclosure, unconscious dynamics are explained, not by self-reflection as traditionally understood but rather by an entirely new method of introspection. Accepting this basic psychoanalytic tenet, the predicate thinking that permeates Freud’s theory escapes the reflexive regress by objectifying the unconscious and leaving the subjective *das Ich* as the scrutinizing subject. (Of course, the entire enterprise assumes that the Unconscious is, in fact, a suitable entity for objectification, a claim that has suffered grievous criticism.) In this sense, *ego* fulfills the requirements of Freud’s objectifying epistemology and the terminology is consistent with its historical use in philosophy.

However, the Cartesian divide (where the faculty of reason and self-consciousness – *me* – is set in an autonomous realm against the other, *das Es*) could not be sustained. The ego proved to have its own unconscious domain, so the structural model’s last iteration assigned the ego both conscious and unconscious characteristics (Freud 1923, p. 24). The second corruption of the insular ego was based on psychological considerations. Although Freud entrusted the analysand’s rationality (albeit weak and fallible) to serve as a bulwark against unconscious forces, he also adamantly rejected the equation of mind with consciousness. He thus would dislodge ‘the arrogance of consciousness’ and asserted how ‘it is essential to abandon the overvaluation of the property of being conscious before it becomes possible to form any correct view of the origin of what is mental’ (Freud 1910, p. 39). And at the level of discourse where psychic data emerges and analysis begins, the standing of consciousness is unsteady in terms of the veracity of its conjured memory, the meaning of its associations, and the rational conclusions of its explanations. Simply, given the limits of the knowing conscious subject, analysis lacks a firm epistemological foundation and, correspondingly, no ‘gold standard’ of judgment. Accordingly, psychoanalysis is interpretation all the way down and thus open to severe criticism as a scientific enterprise. In this latter context much is at stake, for if autonomy has been so severely compromised, how can *I* function with the (albeit limited) authority Freud assigns *me*? Here, an unguarded theoretical flank has been exposed. Indeed, this assault on free will and self-knowledge became a critical factor in the ego’s requiem during the postmodern appraisal of the subject (Tauber 2013).

An Accounting

Freud’s choice of vocabulary, the unassuming *das Ich*, offers a deflationary portrait of the subject, one dramatically different from the Cartesian ego, who asserts his very existence based upon the certainty of his own thinking – a thinking *thing* (Descartes 1985, p. 127). In the psychoanalytic scenario, *das Ich* is

not that sense of self. Indeed, the very notion of conscious certainty is an anathema to Freudian precepts.

Without defining the ego as some natural entity, suffice to accept that the mind integrates disparate forms of human consciousness as a fundamental condition of coherent human cognition. And by dispensing with 'a thinking thing' (an entity), Freud was satisfied with a structure for the 'coordinated organization of mental processes' (Freud 1923, p. 17; see Longuenesse 2017). In that depiction, he sought no further delineation of *das Ich* and left *me* in *the I's* radical subjectivity of *my* self-consciousness. Indeed, the subjective ego never found its conceptual traction in Freud's oeuvre, and perhaps that is why Strachey accepted a vocabulary that would support a scientific orientation articulated with a specialized terminology.¹⁸

Who is the subject? remains an outstanding question (e.g. Borch-Jacobsen 1988; Lacan 1991; Ogden 1992; Moran 1993; Cavell 2006). *Das Ich* skirts the issue. Like Kant before him, Freud only sought to define the conditions from which the subject took form in actions and behavior (Longuenesse 2017), for he was not interested in issues framing personal identity or modeling conscious agency. As a psychologist focused on unconscious processes, the philosophical questions underlying conceptions of the self-aware subject were thereby eclipsed by other theoretical concerns. Indeed, the ego of Descartes' *Ego Cogito Cogitatum* is nowhere to be found in Freud's theory. He makes no inquiry.

about the existential and thinking subject the question of the *I think, I am*. The *Cogito* does not and cannot figure in a topographic and economic theory of systems or agencies; it cannot possibly be objectified in a psychical locality or a role; it denotes something altogether different from what could be spelled out in a theory of instincts and their vicissitudes. Hence it is the very factor that escapes analytic conceptualization.

(Ricoeur 1970, p. 420)

And here at the nexus of questions about the self-conscious ego, Freud employs *das Ich*, a nomenclature that makes no further *philosophical* claims about identity beyond standing for the analysand's own subjectivity and intellectual discernments. Instead, Freud remained satisfied with the voice of *the I*, whose associations, dreams and parapraxis offered an interpretive 'royal road' to the unconscious (Freud 1900, p. 608).

So why did Freud scrupulously avoid 'ego' in German and yet accept its use in the English *Standard Edition*? The simplest answer is that he was following precedent. Given his knowledge of German philosophy, he made a deliberate word choice that closely followed the semantic tradition of *das Ich* established by Kant and Fichte. That amorphous designation sufficed for his purposes.¹⁹ Another possibility resides in an ambivalence about Freud's own overall goals. Jones insisted on the Latinized *ego* in orienting psychoanalysis as a scientific discipline. Freud aligned himself in that effort. However, beyond that aspiration, a humanistic agenda underlies Freud's thinking: psychoanalysis, putting aside Freud's theoretical concerns and postulated mechanisms, ultimately attempts to correct emotional suffering and dysfunction. Such an intervention requires a therapeutic effort that depicts the analysand as an autonomous agent (albeit compromised), who must exercise reason to achieve insight. Indeed, the entire enterprise resides in the analytic grounded in the circumspect freedom to understand deterministic forces at work in the psyche. This is the deepest stratum of Freud's meliorism and it grows from a long philosophical tradition based on Enlightenment ideals that assert the individual's autonomy, reason, and the authority of science. On this view, *ego* – at least as conceived in the modernist tradition – carries an understanding that (1) fulfills Freud's epistemological objectifying requirements (the Cartesian understanding of the ego 'seeing' the world and 'representing' what she sees [Tauber

2013)) and (2) supports the moral ideals embraced by the therapeutic process based upon the Enlightenment ideal of autonomous self-knowledge (Schneewind 1998; Tauber 2010).

Perhaps these dual associations of *ego* account for the general appeal of the *Standard Edition's* terminology. *Das Ich* offers no such connotations. By the mid-1920s, when the *Standard Edition* translations first appeared, Freud had completed the final iteration of his theory and increasingly applied his understanding to social matters. In this humanistic turn, accompanied with a more cautious view of the scientific standing of psychoanalysis, he might have been more inclined to endorse a more expansive approach to address the individual beyond the grasp of the scientific methods he held so dear (Freud 1920, p. 59). In fact, post-Freudians moved towards a larger construct of the individual and turned their attention to ego-based psychologies. With that shift, a firmer designation displaced the ambiguity of 'the I' with a new ego terminology that accommodated the effort to find developmental explanations for psychic dysfunctions and to better examine conscious processes linked to unconscious dynamics. And thus, *the ego* was ensconced as an effective idiom in the psychoanalytic literature, serving diverse theoretical and practical needs.

A third aspect of the *das Ich/ego* debate moves from the Freudian past to the contemporary assessments of the subject. Although dispute about the translation of *das Ich* had a long history (Loewenstein 1940, pp. 386–387; Hartmann 1958, p. 119; Hartmann 1964, p. 127; McIntosh 1986), the later polemics articulated a more general debate about the ways and means of the psychoanalytic endeavor. To fully analyze this argument requires a comprehensive review of the controversies about psychoanalytic agency over the past century, an inquiry stretching well beyond the confines of this discussion. However, such a study promises insight into the evolution of psychoanalytic theory and its wider influence on notions of selfhood, more generally. After all, the issues underlying the contested standings of *das Ich* versus *the ego* have not been put to rest as attested by the vast postmodern literature about subjectivity that has so dominated our own era. And Freud is a central voice in that discussion.

Given the autonomy and dominance of the unconscious, Freud's *das Ich* – delimited in its rationality and understanding – has conceded its free will, the underlying tenet of the Enlightenment's conception of agency. Accordingly, the authority of self-knowledge and rational deliberation guiding moral decision-making that grounds modernity's identification of the ego has been displaced for a more circumspect assessment. And as discussed, the epistemological status of the self-knowing ego has also been severely compromised. Freud thus served those postmodern attempts to decenter the subject and, in turn, this deconstruction has permeated psychoanalysis (e.g., Barratt 1993; Fairfield, Layton, and Stack 2002; Elliott and Spezzano 2019).

In this regard, the self-conscious, analytic ego has been subordinated to the unadorned voice of subjectivity in the rich development of Lacanian-oriented discourses (Lacan 1991, 2006; Fink 1995; Chiesa 2007; Neill 2011). In many respects, Lacan's slogan 'Back to Freud' may be viewed as an explicit returned to the 'voice' of *das Ich* without the trappings of a controlling ego. Ironically, by establishing the epistemological ambiguity of the ego, Freud perhaps inadvertently supported the 'egocide' refutations and the revisionist programs that followed (Rogozinski 2010, p. 5). How and why Anglo-American psychoanalysis followed a different theoretical trajectory that defended, even valorized the self-aware ego, must delve back into English philosophy, where a strong empiricist tradition supported the focus on the knowing-agent (Reé 2019). Following both arms of Freud's legacy, the translation dispute finds its wider significance and we may well ponder, on the one hand, how the supporting culture influences prevailing conceptions of the psychoanalytic subject, and on the other hand, how such an agent contributes to senses of the self in domains far removed from the psychoanalytic couch. The ramifications of how these fundamental questions are answered can hardly be overstated.

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Notes

- 1 The Penguin translation, edited by Adam Phillips, set no standard editorial policy on the translation of technical terms, including das Ich and das Es (“id”). In this instance, Bance deliberately uses ‘the I’ for das Ich, and observes that “‘the It’ and ‘the I’ may seem strange at first, but my experience is that they read quite naturally after a while” (Bance 2002, p. xxviii), an impression categorically denied by others (Whiteside 2005, p. xxxii). So, while many of the Penguin series translators acknowledged the problem with the das Ich/ego conundrum and profess adherence to a more colloquial and accessible English to more closely approximate Freud’s style, only a few chose to keep das Ich (Huish 2002) and the majority revert to *ego* because of its assumed standing in the psychoanalytic literature (Frankland 2005, p. xxii). Bilingual Freudian texts at www.freud2lacan.com/ allow direct comparison of the German original with the *Standard Edition*.
- 2 In reference to On narcissism (Freud 1914), “the term ‘Das Ich’ is used in three main senses: 1. The self: one’s person as the intentional object of libidinal or self-preservative psychic investment. 2. The actual self: one’s person as the actual object of investment, as distinct from the intentional object. In German this idea is conveyed by ‘Das aktuelle Ich’ or ‘Das wirkliche Ich’. The distinction between the intentional and the actual self emerges very clearly in the German text, pp. 161–162. 3. The ego: the person as conscious subject or agent, in ordinary language usages which, however, sometimes suggest the theoretical idea of the system-structure ego. The German term is ‘Das Subjekt-Ich’ or ‘Das Subjekt’” (McIntosh 1986, p. 441).
- 3 According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (“Ego”), the use of *ego* in English psychology appeared by 1830: “In every act of consciousness we distinguish a self or ego” (*Edinburgh Review* 50:200, 1829; for general overview, see Smith, R. 1997)
- 4 Freud only used the word, *Selbst*, once in his writings (fourth paragraph of *Civilization and its Discontents* [1930]). He freely uses *das Ich* as opposed to *Selbst*, but the Freudian *das Ich* does not equate with ‘the self’, although some commentators assume that an implicit understanding suffices (e.g. Dilman 1984, p. 106; McIntosh 1986).
- 5 “Freud never objected to the translation of das Ich as ‘the ego’. When Chase translated the Clark University Lectures, under the direct supervision of Freud, as early as 1908, he used the term ‘ego’ where Freud had written das Ich. Perhaps this also explains why, when Freud wrote a letter in English to Jones on 18 February 1919, he himself used the term ‘ego’ in a place where he would almost certainly have used Ich in German. And for those who would retort that Freud was in no position to judge the appropriateness of an English term, we should remember Jones’s and Riviere’s assurances to the contrary: Jones declared that Freud ‘had an excellent, rather literary command of [English]’, and Riviere wrote that he had an ‘amazing command of the English language . . . absolute mastery’. (Do not forget that Freud analysed Riviere, which gave her the closest possible opportunity to assess his grasp of the English language.)” (Solms 1999, p. 36.) For a review of how Strachey dealt with this issue (including comprehensive citations in which the translations are editorially defended), see Kernberg (1982).
- 6 How Freud’s Jewish identity influenced the British translation, see Gilman (1991).
- 7 For critical appraisals see the entire issue of the *Journal of the Psychoanalytic Association*, Vol. 30 (1982; Hartmann 1964; La Planche and Pontalis 1973; Kernberg 1982; Bettelheim 1983; Meissner 1986; Steiner 1987; Gilman 1991). A useful exchange is found in Wilson’s rebuttal of Ornston’s criticism (Ornston 1982; Wilson 1987). The problem of translating Freud’s writings into French is reviewed in Abensour (2014).
- 8 Note, Anna Freud, an early ego psychologist, followed the standard precedent: *Das Ich und die Abwehrmechanismen* (A. Freud 1936), which was translated as *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (A. Freud 1937). And a key theorist of ego psychology, Heinz Hartmann, in *Die Grundlagen der Psychoanalyse nach Sigmund Freud* (1927) also used *das Ich* instead of *ego*, as he did in his 1939 paper, *Ich-psychologie und Anpassungsproblem*. However, by the 1950s, writing in English, Hartmann would also employ *ego* for his original *das Ich*. Noteworthy in this terminology is a refinement of defining the subject. For him, the teleological task of an individual’s psyche is to adapt to the environment, which required a new construct (and vocabulary) for psychoanalysis – the “autonomous ego” –

- an inborn, biologically oriented mental apparatus that develops independently of the id (Hartmann 1958; Kobrin 1993).
- 9 In 1900, the year Freud published *Interpretation of Dreams*, Mary Calkins wrote a paper that would serve as the Ur-text of what she called, “self psychology” (Calkins 1930). The article defended her notions of a “personalist psychology” as opposed to “atomistic psychology” that “treat contents-of-consciousness as such . . . without reference to any self” (Calkins 1900, p. 490).
 - 10 Various notions of selfhood implicitly reside in Freud’s understanding of personal identity, a mosaic drawn from Spinoza, Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche (Tauber 2010).
 - 11 The disputes centering on the interpretation of retrieved memory date from the earliest presentation of psychoanalysis and renewed in the 1990s during the “memory wars,” when the métier of psychoanalysis again become the focus of controversy (Crews 1995, 2017; Loftus and Ketchum 1994; Shaw 2017).
 - 12 I am indebted to Béatrice Longuenesse for noting the distinctive difference of das Ich as a “metapsychological” concept and the emphasis I place on the subjectivity of the *I* (private correspondence; see Longuenesse 2017). In regard to the various uses of das Ich Freud employs, she further notes that Freud left unresolved how the various notions of das Ich relate to one another, i.e., are these three different concepts or are they three different functions of one and the same structure?
 - 13 Moran (1993) makes the same point by what she calls “structuring,” in which structure and agency form an interdependent recursive process.
 - 14 *Das Es* was coined by George Groddeck in 1923 and translated in English as “the It,” a truly non-committal word choice that reflects the radical limits of characterizing the unconscious as an entity (Groddeck 1976). Here, he famously quipped, “Man is lived by the It” (Letter II).
 - 15 The dilemma was clearly stated by Descartes’ early critic, Pierre Gassendi in 1641:

As far as your idea of yourself is concerned . . . far from having a clear and distinct idea of yourself you have no idea of yourself at all. This is because although you recognize that you are thinking, you still do not know what kind of thing you, who are thinking, are. . . . [Y]ou may be compared to a blind man, who on feeling heat and being told that it comes from the sun, thinks he has a clear and distinct idea of the sun in that, if anyone asks him what the sun is, he can reply: ‘It is a heating thing.’

[Y]ou say not only that you are a thinking thing but also that you are a thing which is unextended. I shall ignore the fact that this is asserted without proof, even though it is still a question, and simply ask you first of all: do you therefore have a clear and distinct idea of yourself? You say that you are not extended; that is, you say what you are not, not what you are. . . . is it not necessary to know the thing positively and, so to speak, affirmatively? (Gassendi 1984, pp. 234–235)

- 16 For Hume, a bundle of perceptions did not constitute a self, and because his self-consciousness comprises fleeting perceptions or thoughts, he “never can catch” *himself* “at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception” (Hume 1978, p. 252). In other words, the ‘me’ of personal identity morphs from moment to moment and thus the ‘I’ is non-identical to itself. Absent an *entity*, there is “no owner” as such – experiences and perceptions exist without a discernable subject. In short, the self, originally conceived as a postulated homunculus (what Descartes called, the ego), lies beyond empirical characterization. This conclusion proves an insurmountable block to Hume’s inquiry, for if the idea of the self is based on what introspection reveals, a “bundle of perceptions” – one thought or image jumping to another – seemingly without causal links, he could not establish the basis for integration of experience and thus he dismissed *the self* as an entity.
- However, as pointed out by Udo Thiel, we should understand Hume’s critique by his own limited criteria, namely, he is concerned only with what might be understood about the mind *empirically*. Accordingly, Hume is “concerned not with the mind’s real nature but only with its introspectively accessible features” (Thiel 2014, p. 421). Thus the “bundle” observations do not address the mind’s unknowable essence, but “only those features about which inner experience ‘informs’ us” (ibid. p. 422). Hume does not deny the existence of a persisting self beyond the perceptions, nor the inner sense of identity, just the empirical basis for such a sentiment. Kant, as mentioned, bypassed this problem by charting the conditions required for integrated experience and thus skirted the question of the self-as-*entity* altogether. Thiel’s philosophical discussion of Hume’s understanding of selfhood and its historical placement is highly insightful (pp. 383–430).
- 17 Anscombe builds from Wittgenstein understanding that the “self,” while a useful linguistic tool, refers to a misleading metaphysical construction. In the World War I *Notebooks*, he mused, “The thinking subject

is surely mere illusion. But the willing subject exists. If the will did not exist, neither would there be that centre of the world, which we call the I. . . . The I, the I is what is deeply mysterious! The I is not an object" (Wittgenstein 1979, p. 80e).

Wittgenstein's discussion of the use of 'I' as subject and the use of 'I' as object (Wittgenstein 1960, p. 66) "insists that in its use "as subject," 'I' is not used to refer to myself as a particular person. Rather in its use "as subject" 'I' has no other function than to express the self-ascription of a subjective state (for instance tooth-ache, in: "I have a tooth-ache"), without any reference at all being made to a particular entity, distinguished from other entities in the world. In this respect, Wittgenstein provocatively maintained, saying "I have a tooth-ache" is no different than moaning" (Longuenesse, 2017, p. 2). Wittgenstein thus uses 'I' narrowly as a semantic expression of inner mental feelings or thoughts, and thereby avoids the self construed as an object, altogether (Shoemaker 2003, pp. 6–18). He came to this important distinction by following Hume's almost cursory, off-hand remark about grammar: "all the nice and subtle questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided, and are to be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties" (Hume, 1978, p. 262). The mistake is not philosophical (in traditional terms), but more basically an error in the use of language, a dominant theme of Wittgenstein's thought.

- 18 "What made the Strachey translation totally acceptable in the English-speaking world for over two decades is precisely what makes it problematic today. Strachey created the impression in the English-speaking world (with Freud's full support) that psychoanalysis was a scientific undertaking. And he created it through his invention of a specialized discourse for psychoanalysis" (Gilman 1991, p. 331).
- 19 Freud, despite his later aversion to philosophy, had sophisticated university training in the subject. His first courses were taken under the tutelage of Franz Brentano, and I have argued elsewhere that this intellectual relationship was instrumental in Freud's own approach in characterizing the mind (Tauber 2010, pp. 48–53). Freud was well acquainted with the German philosophical tradition that used das Ich in dealing with the issues of the knowing subject, Kant, most prominently (Tauber 2010). While Fichte based his entire philosophy on das Ich, with Hegel, Selbst makes its formal entry into the German canon. Of the vast literature see Ameriks and Sturma (1995), Klemm and Zoller (1997), Beiser (2002), Pinkard (2002).

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