

August Seminar 2020

NIDA LACAN STUDY AND READING GROUP

Due to Coronavirus restrictions, we will continue our seminars online until further notice. I will send members copies of the texts of the monthly seminars. New members, please contact us by the email: Ehsan.Azari@nida.edu.au

Seminar V: Formations of the Unconscious (X)

The Ego-Ideal and its Vicissitudes

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In this session, Lacan answers the critical question that the phallus does the signifier's function, and all its role must be investigated in what signifying economy it partakes. During the end of the Oedipus complex, the subject is born with a repressed Oedipal desire, identifying with what Lacan calls an ego-ideal following Freud. This identification, separate from the ego's identification, remains in an ambivalent connection with the subject. The ego identification structures itself on the ground of a body image from the outside (mother, father, caretaker, etc.) that has been fully elaborated in the mirror stage. However, the ego-ideal is internalized by the subject as an ideal-ego. Freud deals with these two terms differently in his seminal essay, "On Narcissism." Lacan seems to be cautious about using these two terms by Freud, for they are so close to each other that readers might confuse the distinction between the two. For Lacan, the clinical experience demonstrates nothing that can be taken as synonymous with the ego-ideal. As such, the ego-ideal implies an ideal image of the ego with which the subject identifies and upholds himself as a wholesale model. When narcissism overtakes the body, it is registered in the realm of ideal-ego. On its part, the ego-ideal intercedes in the "functions that are often depressive, even aggressive with respect to the subject," (Lacan, 2017, 272). In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the ego*, Freud introduces the ego-ideal. He diagnoses all types of depression as a product of a conflictual relationship between the ego and the ego-ideal. The conflict arises from either the upheaval of the ego or from the extremity of the ego-ideal.

Moreover, this conflict upsets the balance of this relationship. In this context, this is the ego-ideal that poses the problems. The ego-ideal takes shape, as hinted, at the Oedipus complex's final phase when the Oedipal tripartite relationship closes. This phase in the Oedipal triangle evolves as the father's stormy arrival is materialized. The formation of the ego-ideal, which lies in the symbolic identification, brings the subject the "desire and rivalry, aggression and hostility mix with one another in a complex manner," (Ibid). The above conflict by way of "introduction and introjection," bears a subjective conversion in the subject that introduces the ego-ideal. This structure keeps links to the external object; still, it remains as part of the subject. In *Seminar X: Anxiety* Lacan recounts the ego-ideal as part of the Other, which becomes convenient for introjection on the part of the subject. It is as much internal as it is external. The ego-ideal and the ideal-ego emerge when the subject makes his self-projection in the ideal realm, where they show their split as Lacan says, "It is a matter of projection of the subject into the field of the ideal, which is split into two strands, on the one hand, the specular alter ego, the ideal ego, and on the other hand, which lies beyond, the Ego ideal," (Lacan, 2014, 307-308)

Lacan argues that the analytic experience indicates that (intra/inter)subjective encounters cannot be separated within a subject. An analysand must sustain his (intra/inter)subjective connections during the analysis.

Whatever the modifications that intervene to affect the subject's entourage and milieu, what he acquires as ego-ideal is like the country of an exile which he carries stuck to the soles of his shoes—his ego-ideal does indeed belong to him, it's something acquired. It's not an object, it's something extra in the subject. (272)

There is always a linking between the ego and the ego-ideal—as something extra—which remains in conflict (bad) or harmonious (good). The relations between subjects (intersubjectivity) are reproduced within the subject by a signifying organization. Attacking cartesian cogito, Lacan always proclaims that we do not think, even though we always say that. There is someone else who thinks within us, and through us, as a brutal and mole arbiter, the superego controls our ego 'and inflicts dreadful misery on it,' (273). Lacan spells out further that the superego acts within a subject as another subject. They are caught in a relationship as if they were two subjects. It is to say that the conditions introduced by the existence and functioning of signifiers as such are sufficient for the establishment of "intersubjective relationships," (Ibid). Here Lacan lays stress on the fact that relations between the subject (intersubjectivity) do not necessarily mean the existence of two persons in the equation. The relation will be built by the existing signifying system in a given culture and society.

Nevertheless, intersubjectivity operates within a single subject. That condition shows itself during an analytic experience. Lacan asks his audience to look at this intersubjectivity to find out for themselves what the ego-ideal function means? This function is not of the superego. It is a function where both the ego-ideal and the superego place their signatures. However, the ego-ideal plays a role in sorting the subject's desire concerning a subject's sexual type choice. The analytic experience offers an analyst a psychopathological opportunity to look at the root and branch causes of failure in a given function. It is important to note that those who expect a therapeutic insight from Lacan must look for the ego-ideal, ego, and superego and determine the source of conflicts that causes enormous self-destruction. That is conveyed by Lacan by his phrase, 'inflict dreadful misery' on the subject. The failure in the subject's identification causes such conflicts. Here, Lacan considers the ego's division under the unconscious pressure that forces the ego to turn against itself.

Lacan gives an example of such a conflict when a woman's identification is projected as the father or she identifies with the father. That is not to say that she becomes the father, but she shows it through a signifying element when "she becomes the father as the ego-ideal...A woman in this case can actually say in the most explicit manner, you just have to listen, 'I cough like my father.' This is indeed an identification," (Lacan, 2017, 276). This statement is something on which the subject pride herself. As Lacan further argues, the above signifying elements in the subject's discourse are not the signifying work of the signifiers. These insignias work like the subject's ego-ideal. Such elements are nothing but 'insignias of the father.' In this way, a woman with the father identification hides behind such masks of masculinity. In this case, the desire of the subject is not masculine. The subject acquires these insignias concerning the mother, who occupies the initial stage of the 'primitive Oedipus complex.' According to Lacan, in these subjects, the desire is to transmute into insignias. As it was hinted at earlier, the father comes into play in her ego-ideal, functioning as someone in the intersubjectivity.

In the identification process, the first element to be accounted for is a libidinal attachment to an object. This object turns into a signifier in the subject in the locus of the ego-ideal. Later, Lacan wants to put this part of his theory of identification and its relation to the ego-ideal differently. He suggests that a female subject adopts the father's position in the attachment with the primordial object, who becomes his rival concerning this object. As an importation of this change, she constitutes herself as an "I, the ego-ideal," (279), not in relation to the father and mother per se, but in a kinship with the object. The subject preserves this position due to "the existence of the signifier in the human psyche," (280). In the masculine case, the signifier passes desire through their gap. What makes this a signified desire is a universal metonymic aspect of the phallus for Lacan, as he states, "the phallus is always there. It's the lowest common denominator of this common factor. And this is why we always find it there in every case, whether it's man or a woman." (Ibid). By definition, the signifiers erode the signifieds by taking

their places. The ego-ideal obtains its constitution from the subject's relationship with the third party in the Oedipus complex—the father. It means the phallus “insofar as this phallus is the common, pivotal factor in the instance of the signifier.” (Ibid).

Lacan calls attention to German psychoanalyst Karen Horney, who criticizes Freud in her feminist psychology, still believed that Freud was right when he underscored the phallic phase in human sexuality as a whole. However, she denied the formative role for this phase in a masochistic position in a female subject. She assigns a female subject not in a passive position. Lacan also reminds his audience of the opinion of another feminist psychoanalyst, Helene Deutsch, who ascribes total satisfaction on the part of a female subject beyond any trace of neurosis following her acceptance of her feminine position. Complete satisfaction comes from her role in reproduction, mainly in pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Another aspect of the ego-ideal that Lacan singles out is its relationship with the object. The ego-ideal itself becomes an object through its insignias mentioned above. One of these emblems belongs to the father's entry, whose physiological appropriateness leads to the phallus's evolution beyond the imaginary. It stays with the female subject's evolution along in the guise of what was called by Freud *penisneid*. In the meantime, depression and melancholia sets in when the ego-ideal repudiates by ego-ideal. This reputation in Lacan's vocabulary implies Freudian *Verwerfung*—foreclosure, a defensive mechanism which denies entry to unwanted imaginary elements in the symbolic, as Lacan says, “It's inasmuch as, on behalf of the ego-ideal, the subject in her living reality can find herself in a position from which every possible signification is excluded that the depressive state as such sets in,” (283). Such foreclosure occurs in psychosis when the subject's ego rejects the symbolic father and his law in the signifying chain. That makes the entry of desire in a subject's demand impossible. When a female subject identifies with the object of desire, she identifies with the father. Lacan takes this as a reason whereby the ego-ideal has a ‘metaphoric character.’ Since the father rejects her desire in her demand, the female subject retains her mother's tie. That also bears on the metaphoric nature of desire that lies elsewhere within a bond with the mother. This shift in desire causes a change in signification regarding the subject's relations to her history as a subject. Because a metaphor's logic would necessitate one signifier's substitution for another, this desire is like a metaphor that Lacan calls *d* for use in his next session. This *d* is in contrast with *D* (the desire as a whole).

Filtered through his structuralist linguistic system, Lacan uses the Freudian concept of the ego-ideal in several of his seminars, and often he offers different models of its definition and its difference from ideal-ego. Even though he often cautions his audience about the similarity between these two concepts, his repeated use in different contexts, this concept might be confusing for readers. He devoted one whole session (31 March 1954) of *The Seminar I: Freud's Papers on Technique (1953-1954)*, to the discussion of ego-ideal and ideal-ego. Here he defines the concept simply as a guide to the desire in the symbolic.

What is my desire? What is my position in the imaginary structuration? This position is only conceivable in so far as one finds a guide beyond the imaginary, embodied in the verbal exchange between human beings. This guide governing the subject is the ego-ideal. (Lacan 1991, 141)

Lacan clarifies his definition of the two concepts. From Lacan's mirror stage, we know the ideal-ego is an ideal image from the outside that the subject identifies with in the imaginary. That is a mirror image that captivates the narcissistic subject of the imaginary. The ego-ideal is the other in the symbolic register and “governs the interplay of relations on which all relations with others depend.” (Ibid). Lacan briefly returns to this point in his *Seminar VI: Desire and its Interpretation*, and states that the ego-ideal enables the subject to see the reflected image as reflected like in a concave mirror, as he states, “the function of a read image that is itself reflected, and that cannot be seen as reflected except from a certain position—namely, a symbolic position which is that of the ego-ideal,” (Lacan, 2019, 19). In *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, he states that the difference between *ich-ideal* (ego-ideal) and *Ideal-ich* (ideal-ego) is a difference “between the mirage of the ego [ego-ideal] and the formation of an ideal [ideal-ego].” (Lacan, 1992, 98). Later in this seminar, Lacan sees the ego-ideal as an archetype of the ego.

The big I designates the identification of omnipotence with the signifier, with the ego ideal. On the other hand, as image of the other, it is the Urbild [archetype] of the ego. (234)

In *Seminar VIII: Transference*, Lacan amuses his audience when spelling out the difference between ideal-ego and ego-idea by giving anecdotal examples. He says that both ideal-ego and ego-ideal are necessary in order for a subject to preserve his narcissism. At issue, in both cases, the boy and girl, is the signifier of the father. The boy behind the wheel and the girl who would be brandishing her communist party card identifies with the signifier (father). The boy introjects him, and the young singer will 'extroject,' the father.

The ideal ego is a body from a good family sitting at the wheel of his little sports car, with it, he's going to take you for a ride. He's going to show off...he must show—or not show, that is, show how it is suitable to show—that he is tougher than others, even if it means having people say he is going a bit too far. This is the ideal ego...What is the ego-ideal? The ego-ideal, which is closely related to the play and function of the ideal ego, is truly constituted by the fact that at the outset...he is a rich man's son, and because—to change register—if Marie-Chantal [a young French singer], as you know, joins the Communist Party, it's to piss off her father. (Lacan, 2015, 340)

In *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan sees the idealization of the ego-ideal in the field of the Other as identification. The origin of the ego-ideal is the primary narcissistic identification. As the mirror stage demonstrates, the subject who sees the mirror image is not ego-ideal but ideal-ego. The process through which the subject finds assurance of this ideal-ego is the ego ideal, "this is the function, the mainspring, the effective instrument constituted by the ego ideal," (Lacan, 1994, 257).

In sum, Lacan began one of his aporetic conceptions, the ego-ideal, and ideal-ego, in which the phallus as a signifier plays a key role. Both are related to identification when the subject submits itself in the field of the ideal. When this ideal is a specular image or specular alter-ego is identified as an ideal-ego of the mirror stage in the imaginary, and when it goes beyond in the symbolic after articulation in the Oedipus complex, it is called ego-ideal. The ideal-ego gives a sense of elation to the subject because it creates an illusion of mastery and perfection. The ego-ideal is problematic because it is always in disharmony with the ego. Depression and melancholia are a by-product of this imbalance. Exploring the ego-ideal and its implication in the gender division, Lacan finally spells out the ego-ideal and its role in identifying and determining desire. Lacan's excessive use of the concept in a different context of his seminars perplexes the reader.

Notes:

Lacan, Jacques, 1991, *Seminar I: Freud's Papers on Technique* (1953-19540), tr. John Forrester, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, W W Norton, New York.

———1992, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, tr. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Routledge, London.

———1994, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, tr. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Penguin Books, London.

———2014, *Seminar X: Anxiety*, tr. A R Price, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Polity Press, Cambridge.

——2015, *Seminar VIII: Transference*, tr. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Polity Press, Cambridge.

——2017, *Seminar V: Formations of the Unconscious*, tr. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Polity Press, Cambridge.

——(2019), *Seminar VI: Desire and its Interpretation*, tr. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Polity Press, Cambridge.

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