

REFRACTIVE PSYCHOLOGY

TAD SPENCER

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Objective and subjective ways of seeing represent the two poles of the conventional Western worldview. An objective stance is one in which the observer steps aside according to a set of rules. We take ourselves out of the picture, observing reality under carefully controlled conditions in order to see exactly what x quantity causes what y quantity, and with the hope that we might entirely avoid the hazards of subjectivity. We know from quantum mechanics, however, that objectivity is never entirely possible. The ‘observer effect’ refers to the fact that, at the quantum level, an experimenter’s observation influences the result of any experiment. Nonetheless, the modern mind continues to place a great deal of faith in objectivity, particularly when reality is viewed through the lens of science (Sewall, 1999).

Refractive psychology is the name I have coined for my theory of personality, wherein psychic material is refracted (altered slightly) as it passes through an abstract component called the “ego lens.”

Meta-statement

Everything that enters or leaves our psyches, through what we perceive and observe, must pass through an “ego lens,” thus being “refracted” into the ego. This ego lens forms over time, based on our childhood development where the child learns about him/herself through the relation to other people, ideas and things. Our lives are then defined by relationship—relationship to time, the environment, our concept of God or the Unknown, other people, information, and other objects.

Background

This is a paper about how personality develops now—in our current age. While I believe there are some fundamental truths about the human species, I also believe that the architecture of personality development changes over time, depending on the time, space, and environment. The following looks at several considerations about where our state of mind is, as a culture, in the 21st Century.

Many aboriginal and native cultures had very little concept of the “self” or the ego as we have come to think of it in modern times. Much of their lives centered around the

communal good and the good of the Earth. In order for their community/society/race to flourish, they knew they all had to contribute in meaningful ways. In today's times, a greater emphasis has been placed on the egocentric self, the individual—the narcissism of the modern era.

In a way, psychology of the past century has contributed to this. Freud posited the theory that there are complex parts and cogs in the machinery of our minds, and that our libidinal drives create conflict within us. “The goal,” in Freud's view, is to keep our drives in check and to maintain some type of healthy equilibrium in the ego—fending off id impulses and keeping the superego from becoming too influential, thus developing ego strength (Ewen, 1998). Everything, therefore, has an intrapsychic foundation. Freud and his contemporaries helped start the world thinking about individuals and human motivation. With so much (still) uncharted territory in the human psyche, many people have become almost obsessive about psychological phenomena within themselves.

But psychological intrigue is not the only reason we are where we are. Another important event focused our attention more on the immediate—the temporal—away from the collective and the eternal. On Monday morning, August 6, 1945, the world witnessed a horrible catastrophe—a powerful metaphor for the new age of existence on the planet. The atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima killed approximately 200,000 people, many of them instantaneously (Snowden, 2002, ¶7). In a matter of seconds, thousands of people could die at the hands of a man-made device, all while polluting the environment and displaying little concern for the larger community of Earth. After such a gross display of power, many people had an existential awakening. *Carpe diem*, I suppose, although even that once-beautiful phrase has been tainted by rugged narcissism—an excuse to drown in

self-indulgent behaviors and solipsistic beliefs. “In the past 25 years we have watched the concept of the self become an almost national obsession. From the ‘do your own thing’ advice of the 1960s through the Me Generation of the 1970s, what Christopher Lasch has called the ‘culture of narcissism’ has pervaded all areas of popular thought” (Masterson, 1988).

Now many years of psychological thought have been watered down to quench the thirst of a parched society—they are dehydrated by their own worries about “What’s wrong with me? How do I gain more confidence? Why do I have these issues?” Psychology for the masses is a dangerous thing. The deluge of pop psychology, plus an accelerated society obsessed with the “right now”—filled with the temporal, quick-fixes, and wanting things faster—rather than the fullness of the now—the present moment as focused, contemplative, and spontaneous—has created a mass of people concentrating on their own needs, their own pain, their own development, their selves. “Within this hurried sphere of motion, both the pace of life and the intensity of the stimulus world around us continue to intensify, largely because of ongoing transformations taking place in the modes of human experience” (DeGrandpre, 2000). Who knows when and where we will be whisked away from this life into the great unknown. As we have discovered (and been reminded of in the tragedies of September 11th), death can hide behind the closet door of any given second. The End would mean the destruction of this self, this ego, this psyche, this ME—not a piece of the larger human context...just the death of me.

The Concept of Ego Reflection

Pop psychologists have drowned us in the notion that if one likes oneself, others like you. If one does not like oneself, others do not like you. They also posit that all

problems are rooted in poor self-image—a strictly one-dimensional, black-or-white-generating figure in our psyches. Attached to this is a governing self-fulfilling prophecy. “The more I examined my beliefs, the more I was awed at their power to operate as self-fulfilling prophecies” (Walsh, ¶7). *If I think that people will not like me, I am probably right—they won’t.* I would agree with that portion—that both the social self-concept (how one perceives the world to view oneself) and the personal self-concept (how one views oneself) are governed by self-fulfilling prophecies. These ideas are borrowed from Rogerian theory (Ewen, 1998). Both are thin veils that never fully hide the truth. If I think of myself as attractive, “put-together” and lovable, but perceive others as seeing no reason to love me, then I get precisely what I have perceived, if for no other reason but my strong projections of the social self-concept onto the situation. The ego is difficult to convince, even when presented with hard evidence, such as someone professing undying love.

On the other hand, I may see myself as ugly and unlovable but have an inflated sense of social self-concept, e.g. the beautiful but insecure model, the popular but anorexic teenage girl, or the powerful CEO who is secretly dying on the inside. Each will experience manifestations of the low personal self-concept through pathology like depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, or even abuse of others. In this way, the prophecy is fulfilled, because others will be miserable in their presence, feeding the belief that they are unworthy, possibly negatively influencing the social self-concept.

Key Concepts in Refractive Psychology

In order to understand how the whole of a person’s mind works when viewed through refractive psychology, it is important to understand the basic components.

The **ego** acts as the control center of the psyche. It is the initial recipient of information and stimuli that come through the ego lens. It is both conscious and unconscious, and it is affected by material in the unconscious. The ego is the only part of the psyche that deals directly with the outside world. A subsection of the ego acts as the “storehouse” of images and information that have come through the ego lens over time.

The **unconscious**, in my view, is similar to Carl Jung’s construct. It houses elements of the collective unconscious, the anima/animus, as well as shadow elements and shadow figures (Ewen, 1998). These affect behavior as regulated by the ego.

The **self** is a more numinous thing. It incorporates the psyche, the spirit, and the kinesthetic history of an individual. The self continues to grow and change as we go through life. In a way, it is a sum of all our parts. The goal for a true self is to acknowledge our own ego lens and make peace with it, to cherish it as a part of us, and to use it responsibly in all actions of our life. Therefore, there is an inherent moral element to the true self. Those who have not recognized their true self are in denial of their own being, a potentially dangerous position. This is usually where intrapsychic pathologies arise.

The **psyche** incorporates the ego, the unconscious, emotions, cognition, and some bodily controls. It is the most generic of these terms, implying the complex, abstract location where much of our psychological phenomena happen.

The Ego Lens

Everything that either enters or leaves our psyches—in the form of images, perceptions, words, people, places, knowledge, emotions, and objects—must pass

through a lens of our own ego. The ego lens is comprised of our perceptions, our assumptions, and our beliefs that have developed over time to create a filter of sorts. The ego lens is not a form of projection. “Some individuals displace responsibility for their situation onto other people, onto life circumstances, onto bosses and spouses, and, when they enter treatment, they transfer responsibility for their therapy to their psychotherapist. Other individuals deny responsibility by experiencing themselves as “innocent victims” who suffer from external events (and remain unaware that they themselves have set these events into motion)” (Yalom, 1980). The ego lens is a complex mesh of perceptions that refract the material mentioned above, thus the name, “refractive psychology.” Regardless of what form our actions or reactions take, they are tinted with our own perceptions of the world and of our selves; we hold some degree of responsibility for all of our actions and reactions, since they have all passed through this ego lens. This is not to say that everything is subjective, for objective truths still exist in our world; however, those truths may have less and less meaning as the world becomes less Earth-based and more ego-based. “Perception is a radically subjective process, which is to say that we have a great deal of influence on how it turns out” (Sewall, 1999).

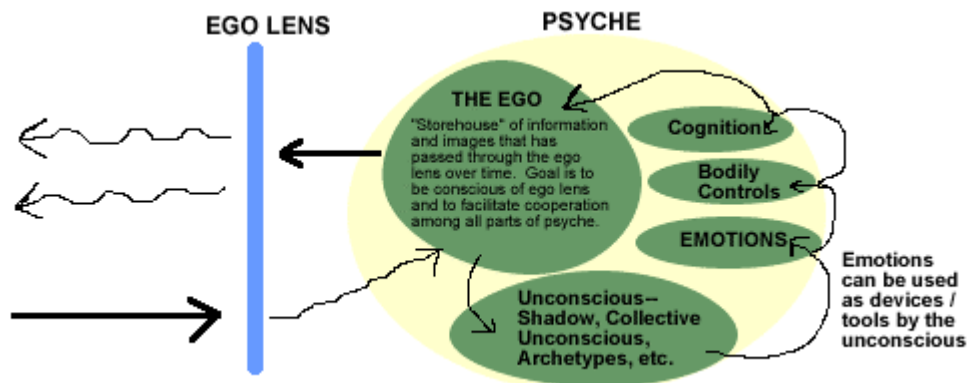


Figure 1: How the ego lens and psyche work together. Information or stimuli come in from the external and pass through the ego lens. This newly altered information is refracted into the ego, which contains the storehouse of information and images that have passed through the ego lens over time. One must work to make the ego fully or mostly conscious of the ego lens and its biases. This facilitates cooperation with all parts of the psyche. The ego processes the initial information and then passes it on to the rest of the psyche. The unconscious adds in possible shadow reactions or other collective unconscious elements that have predisposed the individual to think or behave a certain way. The material then makes contact with the emotions, perhaps eliciting strong feelings, depending on the material from the unconscious that latched on to the original information. The body then reacts, such as muscle tension or increased blood pressure. This may affect cognition or rational thought. The revised glob of information then goes back through the ego (a second experience for it) and refracts outward through the ego lens.

Part of the ego lens includes assumptions or learned mores that we have about ourselves or other people. We perpetuate these assumptions by acting or feeling in a way that is consistent with the perceived way we are supposed to act or feel (Walsh, ¶24). If I am diagnosed as depressed, I may perpetuate it by acting how a depressed person is supposed to act—defeated, lonely, and hopeless.

This works the same with certain social situations, e.g. a single woman may have assumptions about men and the way they are “supposed to act.” She may believe that all men are piggish and rude. She will naturally find men who fit that description. If she encounters one who is compassionate and giving, she may write him off as “not a real man,” or worse, “deceptive.” This is the ego lens flexing its muscle of bias.

How the Ego Lens Develops

As mentioned above, the ego lens develops over time, shaped by several key factors. The first is **location**, one’s physical environment. While this may seem more sociological, there is no doubting that a person’s physical location has an incredible impact on her personality. The section of the world, the country, the region, the geographic (environmental) location, and the neighborhood—all of these work together to shape our ego lens. We should also note that location often creates the economic and social mood of a specific place. “These societal determinants remain external conditions,

economic, cultural, or social; they are not themselves psychic or subjective. The external causes suffering but it does not itself suffer” (Hillman, 1982).

A second key component is **family**, or more specifically, the Adlerian concept of **birth order** (Ewen 1998). Our place within a family unit is the first vital influence on how we operate socially. The concept of family can be divided further into: **relationship with caregiver** and **early interactions with others**. Certainly, as many object-relations theorists tell us, the most important relationship a child can have is the one with his caregiver. That relationship, at a critical time in life, must develop properly. The child also begins to find out about the world and about himself by relating with other people and objects (Masterson, 1988).

A third consideration is **time**, both chronological and how one perceives the concept of time. The era in which we live shapes our ego lens. A person’s generation is defined by cultural occurrences, technology, and, to a lesser extent, the state of the ecosystem. Our view of time is also vital. We may live in a Western culture that sees time as a linear, quantifiable thing, or we may live in a culture that hopes to develop a relationship with time and each esoteric moment.

A final, and equally important, component of ego lens development is **ethics**. All our various sources of ethical lessons combine to build this within us. The ethical element may trigger warning signals about incoming information or perceptions, but more importantly, this piece can help regulate what goes out—our actions and responses. Ultimately, a healthy individual should strengthen this faculty and allow it to become a larger, more conscious part of her daily actions.

How the Ego Lens Appears in Real Life

In creative pursuits, such as the arts, the individual develops a realization of the ego lens (either conscious or unconscious) and uses it to construct modes of self-expression. I, as an artist, embrace my interpretations of the world, thus attempting to return those objects, with my unique finish on them, to the world, as a gift.

In science, an individual may observe specific tests and results, but he interprets those results in his own way, through the ego lens, and then returns the findings, as he wants to present them—reverse ego lens, to the world. (The major personality theorists had histories that gave clues to how their biases and theories developed) (Ewen, 1998).

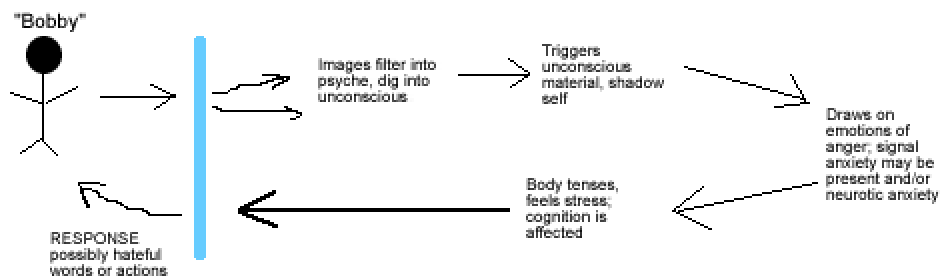


Figure 2: How the ego lens affects our normal reactions with others. In this case, the individual is encountering “Bobby,” a male that elicits hurtful unconscious, shadow feelings. The process is essentially the same as illustrated in Figure 1, above.

We must also remember that as time passes, we gather and store more memories. When we reflect upon old events, we see our past become clouded by the new collection of experiences and memories. A therapist might be suspicious of a patient’s recall of events. How accurate is the patient’s memory of events? We must not overlook the emotion associated with the particular event, regardless of its current guise. Part of the trick of being a good therapist is to recognize the biases of the patient’s ego lens, perhaps even before the patient does. “On a personal level, we strive to affirm our view of reality, whether it be a momentary perception or a long-term assumption about the way of the

world. In psychology this tendency toward affirmation is referred to as confirmation bias” (Sewall, 1999).

Healthy Integration of the Ego Lens

“The real self consists of all our self-images plus the ability to relate them to each other and recognize as forming a single, unique individual” (Masterson, 1988). The goal for healthy intrapsychic incorporation of the ego lens to the self is to recognize what is idiosyncratic about our own refraction. Over time, we must learn to work with what is ours, to take responsibility for our own unique lens. Just as disabled persons learn to live life within the context of their unique abilities, we must all apply this formula for living to our psyches. We are not striving to build up our capacities to an objective, prescribed level based on an arbitrary set of criteria, for it is arguable if one even exists. Our goal, rather, is to live within our current capabilities in the present moment—to do the best we can, or to be sufficient enough to accomplish tasks. Our intellectual foundation is ever changing, growing, forgetting, repressing, ignoring, and deepening. This is why it is imperative for us to develop an awareness of ourselves in the present moment, to be honest about the presence of our ego lens, and to take responsibility for our own uniqueness. The world is not entirely subjective (nor entirely objective), but we must live within it while obeying the master of basic truths, which include: that we are only here within the definition of each moment; that each experience we have is uniquely our own, and that the base for all of our knowing—our psyches—are substantial and power wielding. The degree to which the psyche dominates us or flows with us (being attuned to our uniqueness) reveals how spontaneously (being with minimal anxiety) we can live our lives.

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