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### The Observing Ego

A few weeks after I was informed of the honor to be given to me this evening, I was asked to provide the title for this address. Having no ready thought of what might be appropriate, I offered “the observing ego,” as I had recently read Sterba’s 1934 paper about the fate of the ego. While I wondered what to say about it, a friend suggested that I speak of how an observing ego may have contributed to my professional history. This means referring to some part of my personal history as well.

I shall first comment on the meaning of the observing ego and cite a few examples of its appearance in childhood. What I shall then say that is personal will refer to unseen development of an observing ego in myself. Since I assume that the concept is of singular importance to psychoanalytic psychologists, parts of my story may echo a similar one in each of you. I bring it forward so as to emphasize the significance of ordinary experiences in childhood that drive us to look inward. When we treat our patients, we have the same need to learn about everyday events in their lives, no less than about remarkable or traumatic events that have come their way. Finally, I shall summarize some of the findings from the research I have conducted, in which I became aware of the connection between the observing ego and the formation of character.

Freud (1914) referred to a special psychic agency that “watches over the actual ego and measures it by the ego ideal” (p. 95). That statement anticipated his formulation of the concept of the superego in 1923. He made a further distinction between the concepts of ego and superego in 1932, when he wrote that although the ego is in its very essence a subject, “The ego can take itself as an object, can treat itself like other objects, can observe itself [and] criticize itself” (p. 58). Soon after, Richard Sterba (1934) defined the concept of the observing ego. “Its distinctive character,” he said, “was that the subject’s consciousness shifts from the center of affective experience to that of intellectual contemplation.” The observing ego is not to be equated with the superego, which is largely unconscious, but to a conscious condition within the ego. Nor is it the same as self-observation, which can simply mean giving attention to attributes of oneself that can readily be brought to mind, and unlike the observing ego, need not arouse reflection or judgment. References to the observing ego are infrequent in the literature, perhaps because the concept is more closely related to an ego strength than to a psychopathology.

An observing ego can have its start early in a child’s life. An alert one-year-old, and surely a toddler, can at times notice that he or she has acted in a particular way or can recall a feeling about which to ponder, however briefly. That is to say, he or she can have, as Sterba put it, a consciousness of affective experience. I am tempted to consider that it depends on a capacity for delay, which derives in part from an infant’s ability to wait, and a young child’s ability to withhold impulses and to tolerate toilet training. These abilities are essential prologues to superego development. I say that I am tempted because I have no example of it in the child’s second or third years, when verbalization

for its expression may be insufficient, and when the pleasure principal may still prevail. But I have a few examples of an observing ego in young children.

Amy, age three years, two months, is usually very affectionate toward her mother. On one day when she has realistic cause to be resentful and cranky, she suddenly bites her mother's hand. With surprise and anger Mother cries, "Amy, you bit me!" Amy stands shocked and silent, and after a moment, with head held high, says proudly, "When *I* am a Mommy, *I* won't let my child 'bit' *me*." Amy was stopped short by seeing what she had done. Quickly she was aware of her fault, quickly she stifled her feelings of remorse and seized on the childish defense of projection—enough of an intellectual way out for a three-year-old.

Charles, four-and-a-half, makes a drawing with a Magic Marker on the wall of his room. Asked why, he has no answer. His mother is vexed and tells him to sit on a chair until he can explain why. He sits for a minute or two, thinks, then goes to her and says, "The wall needed it." Charles took time to look inward, to observe a reason for his momentary impulse and act, and found one that might make sense to Mother.

Betty, age seven, when asked the WISC question, "What is the thing to do if a girl much smaller than yourself starts to fight with you?" responds, "I'll tell her she mustn't." While she watches the examiner write it down, she adds, with a big grin, "But really, I'd kill her." Betty, a child with a sense of humor, could not forego mentioning another, outrageous response, to reveal her consciousness of a forbidden impulse that obviously was to be suppressed.

In each of these examples a child gave way to impulse, or thought of one, then wished away its perverse quality by leaping to an intellectual contemplation of it, to

avoid reproof. A capacity for this kind of awareness of an inner state takes time to develop. It is liable to be poor if a child has been either chronically flooded by stimulation or chronically starved of it. Among older children and adolescents, the capacity is more likely to be present because of their increased facility for abstract thinking. It often diminishes in the adult if he or she is not functioning in an environment that facilitates reflectiveness, or is too prone to act defensively, or has not maintained an internal readiness for mental inspection of internal experience.

I think that I began to have an observing ego in childhood partly as a result of much solitude, few opportunities for playful activities, and a great deal of awe about and envy of the knowledge I presumed in my elders. It was a matter of pride for me to internalize their values. I was the seventh and last child of poor immigrant parents. During my earliest years I was left at home with my mother after all the rest of the family went off to school or work. I was known to be a very quiet child, but also a persistent questioner. Probably, like most young children who spend much time alone, although with an attentive mother, I had more questions than I ever expressed. I remember wondering, was I right to think of the sun as a father and the moon as a mother? Why did a flame burst out of the gas jets on the stove just because someone put a lighted match to it? How come I was luckier than my brother—he has only one “behind,” but I had two? —One in the front and one in the back. Why didn’t teachers have first names? I remember often sitting at the window of our basement flat, looking up onto the street, with a vague curiosity about the world outside. There was little else to do beside watching my mother as she quietly cooked, baked, cleaned, and sewed. There were no playthings, no books for a child, no radio or television, and no place to go except to the

market street with my mother and listen to her talk with neighbors. I could amuse myself with pencil, paper, scissors, and glue made of flour and water; or with a doll my mother fashioned out of a cloth napkin, which I could put into a shoebox that served as a baby carriage. Such were the daily events that contributed to my imaginative life. They were limited, but emotionally fertile. They disposed me to be a silent listener and observer.

I became used to the fact that everyone who spotted me, everywhere, made remarks about how small I was. Perhaps I was out of place, and did not belong to my family at all, but to the people who owned the Chinese laundry shop down the street (a family romance in reverse). Many times I sat looking at my face in a mirror, trying to figure out if in fact I was Chinese. Years later I understood why. I learned that at the age of four, I had wandered into the street alone and been lost. My sister went about the neighborhood asking people if they had seen a little Chinese child—she thought I looked like one. That must have been the reason for my wondering what kind of person I really was.

I remember taking pride in my reputation of always being able to supply all addresses, birthdates, anniversary dates, and telephone numbers after we acquired a telephone. It was not many years later that I observed to myself that I must be careful about what information I took into my head. Since my body was small, my brain must be small, so I should not carelessly crowd it with trivia, and too quickly fill up its limited space. This fantasy about my mental capacity was partially undone by my father's efforts to stir my interest in Jewish history and culture. I remember sitting on his lap at the kitchen table, more than once, listening to him translate a Hebrew sentence from the Talmud and describe how the single sentence could be interpreted in myriad ways. He

evoked my admiration that so few words could contain so many ideas. Another related memory of my father from about the same time, is of our standing outside the entrance to the Museum of Natural History, from which we had just emerged, and his explaining to me that if I were to spend every single day for a whole year in that building, I should hardly begin to take in the knowledge it contained. Again, I was impressed to know that such a magnitude of learning was possible. (How we happened to be in such an unlikely place, I don't know.) How could I ever obtain any significant part of it?

My good memory once caused me chagrin. When I was seven, my sister, proud of my ability to remember, had me memorize a few poems by Longfellow. One was "The Village Blacksmith." She then persuaded me to tell my teacher that I could recite it to my class. The teacher, pleased by my recitation, told the principal about it, and she in turn arranged for an assembly of several classes to hear me recite the poem again. For me to be seen as well as heard, someone picked me up and stood me on top of the piano. At the end, I was elated by this bulk of attention, until I overheard one teacher say to another, "Isn't she cunning?" That did me in. *Cunning* was a word I had encountered only in the story of "Little Red Riding Hood." What had I done to identify myself with the wicked wolf? I never told anyone of my embarrassment. I could not figure out how I had blundered.

A conscious predilection to observe and evaluate the behavior of others as well as of myself set in when I was nine or ten. I had begun to notice how my eldest siblings were raising their young children. It bothered me that the children were sometimes given affection or praise, but more often regarded as merely amusing or merely reprehensible. It seemed to me that by not being taken seriously they were robbed of their dignity, so to

speak. One day when I was idly turning the pages of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, I came upon an article entitled "Children are People." I was astonished. Did someone out in the big world really know that? And then I ruminated about how one might best bring up a child. I was moved, as Sterba had said, from a consciousness of stirred-up feeling about children to an intellectual contemplation about child rearing. Would it be possible for me to bring up a model child? And what would a model child be like? I gave much thought to these ideas, and at twelve determined secretly that if I were ever in a position to do anything about it, I should try to establish a law that no one should be allowed to have a child without a license. Something needed to be done so that adults could learn to listen to and respect the thoughts and feelings of children.

I suppose that my preadolescent concerns about the experiences of childhood were prompted by my efforts to understand the dissensions that had arisen between me and my parents, and that commonly arise between youth and age. A first book that was important in my outward emancipation from my parents and from religion at age 14 was H. L. Mencken's *Treatise on the Gods*, a serious and caustic disparagement of organized religion. It made me think about why religion had meant so much to me, and to question the beliefs I had taken very seriously up to then. And so I came to renounce my allegiance to my parents' ego-ideals and to find my own. By good fortune, my longing for new ideals was gratified by two excellent English teachers in high school. They taught me to perceive the ambiguities, the symbols, the condensations, the insights, as well as the grace of fine poetry and prose. Moreover, they heightened my wish to understand the expression of human conflict.

Like many of my generation in the 1930's during the extreme economic depression, I had to drop academic classes and learn commercial skills in order to find employment after high school graduation. Like many others, I stood on lines of applicants at stores and agencies in Manhattan, morning after morning, hoping to get a job application. After months of hopeless effort, I used to steal away to the Main Reading Room of the New York Public Library, where I could call for books to study in quiet comfort.

Back and forth on that Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit reading space, I pored over Emerson's essays, especially the one on "Self-Reliance." Its title must have attracted my attention in a period when I was worried about how I might ever be able to earn a living. The ideas expressed in the essay gave me an intellectual and emotional support that I had been missing for several years. Emerson's statements, written in a Victorian style, were moralistic and rhetorical, yet they had an appeal to freedom of inquiry and freedom of thought that captured my attention. The words, "To know what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, that is genius," touched me. I knew that Emerson had in mind not genius as we usually use the word, but a source of personal richness, a capability to know the common essence of our inner lives. Many other statements in the essay inspired me, for example, "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind," or, "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after one's own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude." (This reminds us of Winnicott's paper on the capacity to be alone in the presence of someone else.) Somerset Maugham said somewhere that youth is an inspiration in itself, and I was young.

I kept on studying poetry and literary essays during all of the time I could spare from job-seeking and caring for my sick parents. As I still memorized with ease, I had the pleasure of taking poems with me on long solitary walks. I practiced reciting them to myself, letting them resonate in me so that I could analyze the nuances in every word, phrase and line, with attention to mood, tempo, rhythm, inflection, and accent. This immersion in poetry was my best recreation. I felt enriched to have collected so much of it in my mind. There seemed, after all, to be space enough in my brain. Musing on this, I one day made a rough count of the lines of poetry that I knew by heart, and found the sum to be several thousand, in addition to the whole essay on "Self Reliance." I mention this because it reflects my conscious wish to absorb whatever I could of the human experiences of others, before I could understand myself.

My love of language and literature had much to do with the economic and social distress in the decade of the 1930's. In those years, so different from the present, external support outside of school were few and meager. There was at that time no such thing as a subsidized education. Aspiring adolescents had to look to their own resources to find direction. The special gain that I received from memorizing and mentally analyzing poetry was that it made me vividly aware of the depths of emotion that may be plumbed, and the precision and fluidity that may be attained in communicating ideas. That mental work had a lasting silent influence on my efforts to write lucidly. At age 20, after my parents died, I was able to pursue my wish to learn about normal children. I had found out about a unique progressive school where this might be possible, and applied for the position of unpaid assistant. Unrealistic for a person with no savings to take a volunteer job, one might say, but in 1935 unemployment was so pervasive that to use time in other

profitable ways made sense. I was probably not alone, in those days, in regarding the opportunity to learn, or to do research, as so special a privilege that it was unthinkable to expect to be paid for it as well. I was accepted by the school director partly on the basis of an essay I had written two years before about misunderstandings of parents. I can recall only two ideas in it. One was that parents give drums to boys and dolls to girls, and then say that boys are naturally more noisy and active than girls. The other idea was about a five-year-old niece who was scolded when she persisted in looking, as if to find something, in the bottom of her mother's closet; I thought her doing so might be related, symbolically, to her wish to find out something about her mother's pregnancy.

In the progressive school, I began as an assistant to the teachers of the two- and then the five-year-olds. My wish was to recognize individual patterns of child behavior, gradually to understand the uses of direct observation in itself, and of self-scrutiny (in response to the needs and demands of the children). That understanding became more important to me than I could realize at the time. By the end of nine years in the school (with bare earning) I had had experience observing older children and adolescents, sometimes teaching them, and so I gained an invaluable though informal education about normal growth and development. In that school, weekly lectures by a prominent psychoanalyst were scheduled for the whole staff (the school director had been analyzed by Ferenczi). That was how I stumbled upon psychoanalysis, listening to Lawrence Kubie, Annie Reich, Bertram Lewin, and others at their high level. As I came to know about infantile sexuality and unconscious conflict, I could add a mildly scientific outlook to the mainly humanistic one that I had nourished up to then. I soon perceived that I must have an analysis. By then I had read and heard enough to believe one should choose an

analyst carefully. It may amuse you to know that in my search I consulted 11 analysts, only three of whom seemed right for me. One, Ruth Loveland, had no immediate time free; the other two were Theodore Reik and Berta Bornstein. Reik offered me three hours a week at \$5 an hour, Bornstein, four hours a week at \$2.50 an hour. (This was in 1938). I chose Bornstein. About 30 years later, I met Ruth Loveland again, socially. Smiling, I asked her if she remembered having seen me once upon a time. She, also smiling, said, "Oh, yes, you interviewed me."

Analysis propelled me to make up the high school credits I needed for matriculation in an academic college, and by attending evening classes wherever I could earn the necessary credits, I earned my B.A. 16 years after finishing high school, and a year later, my M.A. in clinical psychology. By then I had been working, under analytic supervision, with children and adolescents who had emotional problems in school learning. Realizing that to work with troubled children I needed to have exposure to patients with a wide range of psychopathology, I went to The Menninger Foundation in Topeka for an internship. There I was able to attend grand rounds and lectures at the Inpatient Clinic, and classes with psychiatric residents; I earned credits at the University of Kansas toward my doctorate; and was admitted as a candidate in the Topeka Psychoanalytic Institute. I was also invited to take part in Escalona and Leitch's Infancy Research Project, with the promise that if I joined the staff I could use some of the data for my doctoral thesis. How could I refuse? Escalona's project was concerned with individual differences among normal infants. My own idea was to learn about the vicissitudes of infant experience in the oral phase. At that time, in 1949, most psychological studies of infants were related to cognitive and sensory maturation, and to

normative behaviors as measured by the infant tests of Cattell and Gesell. Psychoanalytic papers had just begun to appear, in Spitz's work on institutionalized infants, and in the observations of Willi Hoffer, Anna Freud, Donald Winnicott, and a few others. But there was no systematic, observational study of oral phase development.

I now leave my own story, to review briefly some aspects of the research I have carried on since leaving Topeka. While there I had observed mothers attending to their infants in a standard situation (Escalona and Leitch, 1952). It had become obvious to me that an infant's experiences in the oral phase could not be known except in conjunction with the quality of daily routine care given to the infant by the mother. Therefore I had to examine examples of all of a mother's maternal behaviors with the infant who happened to be born to her, that is, setting aside the infant's constitutional aptitudes, which in those years there was no way to appraise, although naturally the infant's observable behavior was taken into account. Analysis of the data describing 32 mother-infant pairs showed that the simplest index of the mother's total maternal behaviors lay in the way they moved and touched their infants at the infant-age of four weeks, and in the way they fed their infants at subsequent infant-ages. Hindsight may suggest that these findings could have been obvious, but it was not. It had to be discovered by repeated analysis of detailed observations. In that phase of my work I had no supposition about the infants' later development. Evidence gradually appeared, however, indicating that there were important connections between specific qualities of each mother's maternal behavior and specific qualities of her infant's mental and emotional health. The study led me to write about ego formation in infancy, and about unconscious fantasies of mothers, in my first book, *Patterns of Mothering*, in 1956.

That work turned out to be a pilot study for the larger project that began in 1963, funded by NIHM, with a sample of 131 normal infants and their mothers, in New York City. To make a long story very short: my first plan was to see whether the types of maternal behavior observed in the Topeka sample could be replicated, in a fashion, in a larger, urban sample. If so, one could look with more assurance for relations between patterns of maternal behavior and qualities of infant development in the oral phase. With the use of 16mm films and the assistance of a statistician, I was able to identify seven types of maternal behavior. They overlapped with the four types seen in Topeka. Differences among them were supported by clinical data, and I was able to identify seven types, ranging in size from 10 to 27. We collapsed them into two groups. One was made up of 45 mothers, whose maternal behavior was more adequate, that is, they were empathic and competent; the other was made up of 86 mothers whose maternal behavior was less adequate, that is, they were restrictive, aggressive, harsh, withdrawn, or erratic. According to this classification, significant relations were found between the greater or lesser maternal adequacy and the greater or lesser maturity in the infants at age one. The results of the work were reported in the first book about the project, *Anxiety and Ego Formation in Infancy*, by my late husband, Sidney Axelrad and me in 1970, and in seven 40-minute teaching films that we made about types of mother-infant interaction (now held at the Archives of the History of American Psychology at the University of Akron in Akron, Ohio.)

Quite unexpectedly, the William T. Grant Foundation funded a follow-up study to observe the children's development until their age seven. At the end of that second phase of the research (n=121) significant relations appeared between the quality of infant

experiences and the quality of development until their age seven. This is partly explained by the fact that the maternal behavior and attitudes in the six years after the children's infancy, was found to be consistent with those observed during their infancies, and by the generally similar attitudes of the fathers. The relations between the earlier and later development were shown in clusters of criteria used to evaluate the children's development that matched those used to evaluate the infants' development, for example, the range, intensity, and stability of affects and object cathexes, character traits, activities when alone, cognitive abilities, fears, and habits. The detailed story was described in a third book about the study, *Mothers, Fathers and Children: Explorations in the Formation of Character in the First Seven Years* (1978).

Curiosity led me to find as many subjects as I could when the eldest was nearing age 18. I found 98, and carried out a second follow-up (n=91). My hypothesis was that the 34 subjects who had been more adequately mothered in the first year of life would at 18 show more signs of mental health and character maturity than the 57 subjects who had been less adequately mothered. The hypothesis was supported for 86% of the sample. The level of character maturity was seen, for example, in the extent to which the subjects' showed the presence or absence of a benign superego, social concern, awareness of inner conflict with striving toward its resolution, a balance of impulse control and discharge, moral and intellectual values, courage, and a sense of humor. *All these qualities interlaced with the development of the observing ego.* These findings will appear in *The Evolution of Character: Birth to Age 18. A Longitudinal Study*, by Miriam Siegel, Ph. D. and me.

From the mass of data gathered about the infants, children, and adolescents, and their parents, we have been able to recognize that character qualities such as the range of affects, the varieties of object cathexes, and the social investments observed in early childhood and often in the latter part of infancy, were stable with significant frequency up to age 18 and beyond. According to our findings, we stated that character structure, with the observing ego as one of its salient elements, should no longer be regarded mainly as a resultant of intrapsychic conflicts arising in the oedipal phase, but as concurrent with preoedipal, oedipal, and posteoedipal development. These statements are supported *The Evolution of Character*, as noted above. Needless to say, my years of psychoanalytic experience with children, adolescents, and their parents have had essential influence on the hypotheses that I have sought to test.

You may yet ask how the above slight personal remarks and the large investigation connect with the observing ego. Our study revealed sharp differences in the capacity for an observing ego in the adolescents, a capacity that appeared to be closely related to an early experience of empathic and competent care. The observing ego enables a person to discern inner affects, ideas, and fantasies by a willing expansion of consciousness. Such a hypercathexis of attention to internal events facilitates insights. It allows a person to consider whether he or she has tested reality clearly, and how appropriately he or she has responded, even to a passing or an inconspicuous private experience. In some instances, it prepares one to judge whether one's behavior has been governed by active or passive aims.

The connection between the slight personal remarks above and the research investigation lies in that both indicate that the observing ego can begin to develop early in

life, that it has an important function in promoting the passage from ego formation to superego and character formation, and that it can also set a foundation for creativity. In many of our subjects, as in myself, the observing ego reinforced and was reinforced by efforts toward sublimation. I think that only a person who has developed a superego can have a relatively benign superego and achieve a soundness of character, that which comprehends an empathy for one's inner life. Obviously an excessively observing ego can shape an obsessional character or neurosis, or to narcissistic pathology. Finally, the observing ego, without which the psychoanalytic process at any age must falter, may be regarded as evidence of a capacity for a most mature form of introspection. While it can coexist with neurotic conflict, it can still provide a mark of the level of mental and emotional development a person has achieved. I am inclined to think that the observing ego is usually more integral to achievements in art, music, literature, and other humanities, than to achievements in the natural sciences, although the latter may be uniquely creative in other ways.

I do not wish to end without alluding to a fundamental source, in my late adolescence, of my dedication to direct observation and research. It was the reading of Huxley's essay, *On a Piece of Chalk* (1868). The essay is an exquisite model of minute observations of tiny fossilized marine organisms dating from ancient times, to be found in the white chalky cliffs of Dover and other coastal sections of England. It tells the story that those organisms contain about our physical and chemical world. Huxley composed the essays for an address to workingmen, to whom he liked to give lectures on scientific subjects. It was my first introduction to the use of the scientific method. It deepened my commitment to the value of direct observation, and to the study of the evolution, not of

geological phenomena, which have their own fascination, but of the evolution of behavior, conflict, and character, from early infancy onward.

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