READING

Erikson's General and Adult Developmental Revisions of Freudian Thought: "Outward, Forward, Upward"¹

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In this paper I explore Erik Erikson's revisions of Freudian thought and reasons for his conceptual departure. I show Erikson as the second stage psychoanalytic theorist who shifted thought upward in consciousness, outward to the social world, and forward throughout the complete life span. I explore Erikson's dispute of Freud's reductionism and predeterminism, and illustrate Erikson's movement afielid of a model of mental illness, fragmentation, and negation. I explore Erikson's view that the social world is both inside and outside the psyche, rather than solely external to the person as Freud had held. Addressed is Erikson's conversion of Freud's notions of adult morality to a developmental view of the adult as a potentially moral-ethical person, and Erikson's revision of Freud's concepts of the potentially rational adult to a view of the adult with rational and emotional attributes.

KEY WORDS: Erikson; Freud; adult development; moral; ethical development; prejudice; psychosocial development.

ALIGNMENT BUT WITH KEY REVISIONS

As Erikson departed Vienna for the United States in 1933, he held early psychoanalytic notions that were on par with Freud's thought. In other ways, he diverged markedly from the Freudians, even

¹These words are Erikson's (1975, p. 39) terms for his theoretical focus. Erikson said that he had felt compelled to alter Freudian views, for the second stage psychoanalytic thought in which he participated required a focus on healthy development instead of attention to deviations from health. Such thought also required analysis of the importance of consciousness and of engagement in the social world, as well as a theory of adult development that extends throughout the mature years to chart the person's psychosocial growth and the development of principled behavior. To Erikson, Freud's views were reductionistic due, in part, to their placement within Newtonian and Darwinian thought. Further, Freud's thought was based on the assumption of an invariably moral person, and of the human who would eventually rise above the irrational powers that he found to govern the self. In this paper, I take up these points. I look to Erikson's revisions of Freudian thought, emphasizing the ways in which he made us think differently about psychological life and about adults in their ongoing development. This synthesis adheres to the points Erikson himself made about his departure from Freud, thoughts that appear in Erikson's (1987b) Harvard notes and marginalia, in his audiotapes, and in portions of his published writings.

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Freud and to that founder's thought. Freud became Erikson's "mythical father" (Erikson, 1975, p. 29), and Freud's astonishing discoveries presided over a radical new way of seeing that attracted and held a young Erikson's revolutionary, "Bohemian" image of the world (Erikson, 1975, p. 28).

Further, by accepting the content of the psychological apparatus and by practicing as a Freudian psychoanalyst, Erikson is inseparable from the founding tradition. Erikson (1975, p. 36) wrote that he accepted major portions of Freud's revised structural theory of the mind. He held that each person's superego is built on the model of the parental superego, and that it functions both as the guardian of moral behavior and as the agent of resistance to personal liberation and historical change. He ascribed great importance to insight in patients and to the importance of practitioners' ongoing insight development through a continual self-analysis. To him, psychoanalysis was the preferred method for unearthing and confronting unconscious truths.

Nonetheless, to a latter day Erikson, Freud's thought was reductionistic, negative, and mechanistic, a product of the Newtonian energy dynamics of the 19th century that Freud had transported into psychoanalytic material. This had led to "unchecked reifications" in Freud's work of constructing the id and ego, and in conceptualizing libidinal forces, a problem that intensified in the more doctrinaire of Freud's followers (Erikson, 1975, p. 37). As well, Erikson held that Freud's thought was based on mental illness. It avoided asking questions about what it is that brings one forward in healthy developmental content and time. Erikson (1975, p. 37) noted that Freud's thought was also arbitrarily fixated on beginnings and instincts. The view was "backward . . . downward . . . and inward" to instincts and to pathology presumably originating in infancy; thus it held an "implicit fatalism" (Erikson, 1987a, p. 598) that second-stage psychoanalysts such as Erikson had to dispute.

Indeed, although Freud is known to have revised many of his tenets over time, he held to one principle metaphor throughout his psychoanalytic years. This metaphor was the psyche of origin as a long buried, archeological artifact. Freud (1905) said that his work was that of "a conscientious archeologist" who searched through the "mutilated relics of antiquity" (p. 12). Thus, archeological ruins and their unearthing were both the content and the "excavation" technique of psychoanalysis (Freud, 1937, p. 259). "Pompeii," "the tomb of Tut'ankhamum," and repressed material yielded equally "to the work of spades" (Freud, 1937, p. 260).

Erikson disputed that the psyche is organized in strata of ever deeper, more primitive layers that the psychoanalyst must dig through in order to unearth the most submerged bedrock and, hence, the greatest riches (Erikson, 1958b, p. 118). The archeological premise led Erikson to say that he could accept six of the seven principal tenets of early psychoanalytic thought, those of the importance of the unconscious, the mechanisms of resistance, repression, and transference, the relevance of instinctual and sexual life, and the meaningfulness of the experiences of infancy (Erikson, 1975, pp. 33-34). Erikson could not accept Freud's seventh constituent, that of "originology." To Erikson (1975), the "originological fallacy" was Freud's errant archeological view that all neurotic disorders can be traced backward and downward to their beginnings in early life (p. 160). A latter day Erikson claimed that this position is regressive, structural, and fixated, one that incorrectly leads to the notion that later life is predetermined by the conditions of infancy. In his revision of Freud's view of the normal or ill mind, Erikson (1958b) maintained that "man is not organized like an archeological mound, in layers; as he grows he makes the past part of all future, and every environment, as he once experienced it, part of the present environment" (pp. 117-118). Early support or difficulties cannot chart the entire life course, and origins are not prescriptively deterministic. Therefore, Erikson (1975) countered with concepts of movement "forward" to and through adulthood, and held that the mature ego makes investments and choices that are born of postchildhood development (p. 39). In aiming to overturn the primacy that psychoanalytic thought had placed on instinctual origins, Erikson instead emphasized ongoing process, health, and developmental direction, the person as an agent of his or her own psychosocial maturation. Necessarily, this found him attending to adult content, as well as to the adult's role in steering development, the development of self and of children.

With respect to Freud's premise that abnormalcy is the point of departure for understanding normalcy, Erikson held that mental normalcy had to be the point of departure. Deviations from mental health failed to meet the test of assessing wholeness, completeness, and stability on their own terms. To Erikson, psychology's history was one of focusing on fragmentation instead of human integration. Writing
autobiographically in 1975 about his early psychoanalytic training in Vienna he said:

The question remained, I felt dimly, whether an image of man reconstructed primarily on the basis of observation in the clinical laboratory might not lack what, in man’s total existence, leads outward from self-centeredness to the mutuality of love and communality, forward from the enslaving past to the utopian anticipation of new potentialities, and upward from the unconscious to the enigma of consciousness. (p. 39)

Tilting the second section of his final book, Toys and Reasons, “Ritualization in Everyday Life,” Erikson (1977b) showed his departure from Freud who had titled one of his books Psychopathology in Everyday Life. Erikson meant his altered wording to show that one must study and understand normal, healthy, and whole humans and their incorporation into society as the focus for all else, mental illness included. Departing from Freud who used the fractured, archeologically examined ill mind, traced back to its origins in infancy, as his frame for portraying normalcy, Erikson countered that mental health cannot be best understood on the basis of mental illness, just as the infantile beginnings of psychological life are not determinative.

Persons continue to adapt to life as it unfolds, Erikson held, as the content and the meaning of mastery change with new requirements and abilities. Thus, if early origins are not inviolate, they and related difficulties cannot chart the entire life course. Later nurturance and support, or disintegration and exclusion, can alter any beginning course of events. For each stage of life, Erikson thus posed strengths that hold the ego together and, at each stage and cumulatively, illustrate the attributes that show the person’s capacities and accomplishments. Just as hope, will, purpose, and competence are the principal ego strengths of infancy and childhood, Erikson (1964) said, “fidelity” in ego identity is the strength and competence of adolescence (p. 115). In the postadolescent years, he held that ego identity is strengthened through the competencies of love, care, eventual integration, and a return to hope (Erikson, 1987b). In all such strengths, the human reaches out to the social world and moves upward in consciousness. Indeed, based on the work of Vaillant (1995, 2000), contemporary thought holds that the mature ego defenses of sublimation, suppression, humor, anticipation, and altruism are mechanisms of heightened consciousness; they are also developmental progressions from unconscious, less mature defenses such as denial, reaction formation, and projection. And, just as the higher level ego defenses represent movement forward in developmental maturity and upward in consciousness, the more mature defenses are those that are more socially-centered than self-centered, Erikson’s (1975) “outward” notion (p. 39).

In other respects, Erikson cautioned against viewing the psyche in too limited a manner. Sexuality was as omnipresent to him as to Freud, but the concept of libido encompassed much more to Erikson than sexual instinctual energy alone. To Erikson (1958a), libido meant the full range of instinctual drives and inborn motivational forces (pp. 135–166). Thus, Freud’s psychosexual view found conversion in Erikson’s thought to a psychosocial rendition. Sexuality was but one way in which humans express themselves as more complete biopsychological and social beings.

With such early thoughts, Erikson first focused on child development and then moved upward through the life span to consider the problem of ego identity in adolescence. He then turned his attention to adults, considering the meaning of intimacy in young adulthood and of generativity and integration, respectively, in the middle and later years. This is not to say that Erikson departed completely from Freud, even with respect to adulthood. Freud is often quoted as having said that being adult means “to love and to work.” In his unpublished notes, Erikson claimed that Freud had also stipulated “isolation” and “stagnation” as adulthood’s negatives, as the developmental traps that each person must confront if he or she is to move forward, in health and competence, throughout the rest of life (Erikson, 1987b; Hoare, 2002, p. 187). Combining these concepts, intimacy (love) against “isolation” became Erikson’s (1987b) first stage of adulthood proper while generativity (work) against “stagnation” became his second adult stage. It is not that Freud developed such ideas. He did not. Yet these and others of Freud’s premises became Erikson’s springboard to more complete concepts.

Countering Reductionism, Newtonian Physics, and Darwinian Predeterminism

On more than one occasion, Erikson (1982) excused Freud for his “mechanistic and physicalistic” view of the human psyche (p. 19). This, said Erikson (1975), was understandable in that a man of science such as Freud had to use the scientific views that were then available for engaging one’s thought (pp. 36–37). As a physician educated in the
19th century, Freud held to the dominant scientific views of Newton and Darwin. Following Dubois-Reymond, Freud was dedicated to discovering a science of the mind that held “new forces equal in dignity to the chemical physical forces inherent in matter, reducible to the force of attraction and repulsion” (Bernfeld, 1944, p. 348). Owing to his work in neurology and to premises established by the Newtonian-based Hermann Helmholtz school of physiology, Freud held that complex matter, the human included, was reducible to elementary particles and forces. In The Project for a Scientific Psychology, Freud (1989) stated that the aim of the project was to depict the functions of the psyche as specific, quantifiable elements, “neurones,” that aim to retain balance in the state of excitation (p. 87). He described a closed, constant system of excitation and discharge, one governed by inertia and Newtonian based ideas of energy conservation.

Bound to its primitive nursery, Freud depicted the psyche as a Newtonian analogue, a closed system. Transferring physical principles into the psyche whole cloth, Freud used Newton’s very vocabulary, writing in terms of “quota” and “quanta” of energy (Freud, 1894, pp. 60–61), of “mechanical forces” (Freud, 1989, p. 567), of “attraction and repulsion” (Freud, 1969, p. 19), of the “motor force of instincts” (Freud, 1989, p. 566), of “the principle of inertia” (Freud, 1989, p. 88), and of “resistance” (Freud, 1965, p. 344) and “discharge” (Freud, 1965, p. 640). To Erikson (1963a), “Freud used the thermodynamic language of his day, the language of the preservation and transformation of energy” (p. 63); however, the primacy of “physical concepts ... combined with histological concepts to create a neuronic golem” (Erikson, 1975, p. 62).

Further, in viewing the person as an intact, closed system, there was little provision for the psyche’s influence by others in an intersubjective, social world. The environment was just that, a reality that served the species, while hunger satisfaction preserves the individual. This notion, one that explains affection and attachment on the basis of its second-order derivation from primary drives, has been countered by a wide range of studies since the late 1950s. Among them, and confirming Harlow’s (1958) studies of infant monkeys’ preferential attachment to nonfeeding cloth mother replacements over wire replacements that supplied food, dozens of studies of human infants have shown that attachment is a primary, nonderivative need (Eagle, 1987). As Balint (1937) observed many years ago, pleasure seeking
and drive satisfaction are themselves secondary to love for the primal other.

Evolutionary thought might have helped Freud to look to the origin of the individual, paralleling Darwin’s search for the origin of the species, but it primarily served Freud’s backward, downward view. Freud did not include concepts of contemporaneous or future-serving environmental adaptation except for the roles of sexuality, hunger satisfaction, and, in some instances, aggression. Epstein (1994) too has noted this as a defect in Freud’s depiction of the unconscious, saying that Freud postulated a “maladaptive system,” not a model of behavioral adaptation that effectively serves one in surviving a harsh world (p. 709). Adaptation requires ongoing, resourceful accommodation to changing conditions in which one avoids living as a chameleon who passively adjusts to imposed environmental circumstances.

Erikson countered each of Freud’s mechanistic views. He understood that the physical and evolutionary concepts Freud had used as tools for thinking about the psyche acquiesced to the laws and logistics of science. If, in such applications, Freud had reduced the psyche to an earlier archeological prehistory and a contemporary enclosure of elemental instincts, Erikson would avoid this. To Erikson (1964), such efforts were part of Freud’s agenda to “create a mind-robot, a thinking machine,” in effect attempting to justify a new psychological field of study as a rigorous, quasi-scientific enterprise (p. 31). The human is a subject, Erikson (1975) wrote, one who is irreducible to elementary particles and forces, a reduction he titled Freud’s “scientism” (p. 40). Origins can be countered by later experiences and by subsequent human encounters, and the person lives among others, intersubjectively and socially, in an embedded, open context. Further, the “outerworld” is more than a surrounding environment that is somehow disembodied from the person and, as such, is not assimilated into the psyche. Instead, Erikson held, the context of one’s social, cultural environment and times lives within and scripts symbols, messages, and meanings onto the psyche. In fact, although Erikson (1975) could not have known it when he left Freud’s Vienna in 1933, “outward . . . forward . . . (and) upward” would chart his life’s work (p. 39). Moving “outward” he conceived of the human whose psyche is infiltrated with the external world, an open systems view. Unusual for the era, as early as 1939 and 1943 in his respective writings about the Sioux and Yurok Native Americans, Erikson showed the many ways in which the social-physical world exists inside the human mental world.

Encoding the Psyche: Geography, Spatial Ideas, and History

Among the Yurok Erikson discovered a “centripetal” world in which geographic directions toward or away from streams and rivers conveyed ideas of a small geographic sphere in which salmon were central. Shell money came from coastal waters; edible game was sent from the far distant rim where earth and water met sky. The Yurok experienced a “horror of unrestricted radius,” thus confining their activities to a circle that protected them from dangers; beyond the circle unknown others lurked, waiting to ambush tribal wanderers who ventured out (Erikson, 1943, p. 273). Dramatically opposite the Yurok world, Erikson (1939) saw that the South Dakota Sioux were shaped by vast concepts of space that were born of the immense prairie they roamed. Theirs was a “centrifugal” existence, one that infused their language, their ideas, and their behavior as a nomadic people in search of buffalo and other game.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, many would conclude that such American Natives’ notions were emblematic of primitive ideas inspired by incomplete information, magical thinking, and superstitions. Here Erikson might agree, but only in part. He found “subverbal” ideas to “dominate,” and constrict the thought of every group he studied (Erikson, 1942, p. 483). The “Maginot Line” and the “Limes Wall” had crept into the fears and internal divisions of the German people in the 1940s, a people and country that were circled and felt trapped by physical borders and potential encroachment by others (Erikson, 1942, p. 483). In the United States, a land mass protected by vast oceans created a sense of insulating space, feelings of freedom from invasion, and perceptions of an always new, self-made human. Its frontier and explorer ideation, its pleasure in newness, and its sense and use of space, reflect the outgoing behavior and the genial, optimistic attitudes of a country in which anything is possible. In all such national imagery, a country’s landscape, its geopolitical existence, and its potential for violation or freedom from intrusion by others exist in its collective imagery, in its sayings and songs, and in its people’s psychologically conditioned sense of self. As a universal tendency, the external world lives within and presides over the psyche.
Erikson held that the more immediate environment feeds the psyche as well. In *Childhood and Society* (Erikson, 1950, 1963a), he showed how a crisis in a 5-year old boy mirrored his mother's deepest conflict, and how certain dormant, long term conflicts born of a family's perception of its race's history and of the contemporary location of that race in the larger society, joined up with family crises in various generations. In that same source, he described a war-stressed marine whose ego fracture was precipitated by the discord of functioning in a despised wartime role that echoed earlier traumas. Erikson thus illustrated how a person's body complies with deep-seated psychological needs, experiences, and fears to sabotage the ego, producing physical and mental illness.

With such psychosocial observations Erikson showed how humans function in a social context that infuses psychological structures and mechanisms. This was a bold departure from the Freudians. Although some Freudians had validated the significance of the social world, Sigmund Freud maintained that social groups were completely external to the self and were largely of erratic influence. To Freud, this was the case however forceful some groups might be in changing thought and behavior through collective pressure or appeal. At the age of 65, in a 1921 essay that holds four brief paragraphs, Freud (1989) first spoke of groups. Rather disdainfully, he compared the “group mind” to a “herd instinct.” Freud wrote: “it seems difficult to attribute to the factor of number a significance so great as to make it capable by itself of arousing in our mental life a new instinct that is otherwise not brought into play” (p. 628). Although he then acknowledged a realm of “group psychology” that went beyond his study, he held that its entire content asked “only ... a few questions with which the depth-psychology of psycho-analysis is specially concerned” (p. 628). Anna Freud was somewhat closer to Erikson's concepts, yet to her the group held only the ability to influence, but not to infiltrate, human ideas and imagery or the ego's centrality and competence.

Partly because of the personal influence of August Aichhorn in Vienna, Erikson asked how unique societies and the external milieu become internal to the person, how an ethos of social, cultural rituals, and understandings are transmitted to each infant, and how such an ethos and its norms solidify as the child develops into an adult, incorporating social understandings, customs, mores, and group values along the way. To him developmental and psychoanalytic understandings were incomplete to the extent that they failed to incorporate such patterns, adaptations to them, and symptoms that show difficulties. Further, if external reality differs, if the ethos and norms of various societies differ, then these various realities are assimilated into, and expressed, as culturally unique ways of being in the world.

Principally, Erikson was interested in the ways the social world offers opportunities for the human identity, supporting each ego that reaches out to engage in personal, work, social, and civic roles. As well, he was concerned about how the deprivation of identity possibilities and engagement can become the norm for some persons and groups in society, a deprivation that winds its way into internal psychological mechanisms. In this, he focused on health and the maintenance of wholeness, a wholeness he saw as aligned with opportunity, with a supportive society, and with its organization.

With respect to Erikson's work on the forward trajectory of development, when he considered adults, Erikson (1987b) held that Freud's work emphasized adulthood stasis and developmental negatives, that reading Freud one envisaged adulthood as an unchanging station for maintaining maturity. Adulthood had been conceptualized as a mere dessert of time in which each individual knew only what he or she must avoid doing. At best, Erikson (1987b) held, Freud had described a dormant period in which there is only a comparative absence of childhood fixations, repressions, and drives. At worst, Freud's view tipped the scale toward moral prescriptions, “dysfunction,” and human failings (Erikson, 1977a). Stasis, fears, and the awareness of potential behavioral deviance had become the ground plan for development through notions of what one should avoid being and doing. Expressing development in terms of a resting or frozen state and the absence of deviance, Erikson (1987b) held that theorists had missed conceptualizing what it is that adults are and can become in their own years of maturity. The beginnings of psychoanalysis in pathology had prompted it to define a positive state in negative and fragmented terms. Rather, adulthood is integrative and holds substantial content of its own, Erikson insisted. Such content alters chronologically mature persons in complex ways. Thus, Erikson understood his own psychoanalytic trajectory as that which inverted a major part of Freud's agenda. Erikson and Erikon (1978) wrote, “I developed some of what I learned, asking: if we know what can go wrong in each stage, can we say what should have gone
and can go right?” (p. 2). Closer to the medical model that uses anatomical and physiological normalcy as its basis for understanding illness, Erikson moved upward and forward through the lifespan with positive, healthy psychological development in mind. He conceptualized identity as the work and aim of adolescence. He then continued along teleologically, asking about the developmental accomplishments that might chart the adult’s competence and better self. He asked: What are the purposes and goals of biopsychosocial adulthood as a consequence of conscious and unconscious development? What is it that each person needs from important others in order to thrive developmentally? Erikson (1975) avoided using the term “adjustment,” for, to him, this meant a mere passive coping with conditions as they are presented to the person and community (p. 253). Instead, Erikson (1975) he insisted that mental health requires the person to function actively as an “adaptive” organism, as one who, to the extent possible, makes environmental conditions conform to human needs (p. 45).

FROM FREUD’S BELIEF IN ADULT MORALITY TO ERIKSON’S CONCEPTS OF THE MORAL-ETHICAL ADULT

To Erikson (1969), Freud had taken morality “for granted” (p. 113). Seeing the harshness of the superego, studying the pathalogy wrought by the restrictive taboos of his Vienna-era morality, Freud had assumed the near-universality of harsh prohibitions that are used by the self against the self and others, presumably for self-protective purposes. Indeed, Freud may have become aware of supreme immorality only in the final decades of his life through witnessing the growing influence of Hitler. Yet, even then he held that the superego, subsuming conscience, and the ego ideal, was an omnipresent moral imperative. In particular, the ego ideal constricts behavior along righteous lines. The “ego ideal” is Freud’s concept of a perfection-enhancing function that an adult projects as a “substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal” (Freud, 1989, p. 558).

Considering Freud’s pervasive faith in human morality, he likely did not recognize the full extent of the human potential for depravity and evil. Interviewed by Robert Coles (1995) near the end of her life, Anna Freud made this very point about her father; he could rest assured, she said, that the human conscience was omnipresent. In fact, Freud maintained his penchant for describing the ways that the superego penchant for describing the ways that the superego carries prohibitions. In effect, he told of how and on what basis adults learn to say “no” to thoughts and actions they have been normed to consider reprehensible. In his classical way, he wrote in terms of developmental negatives, avoiding charting what it is that adults learn to affirm, the precepts and principles to which they will say “yes” as they guide themselves and develop youth.

As a second stage psychoanalyst who had personally experienced two world wars, a theorist who had fled Vienna with his family just ahead of the Nazi’s advance, Erikson saw things differently. It is not that he wrote about evil as psychopathology. In fact, he too avoided depicting evil for his readers. However, he did illustrate prejudice as one’s negative identity, and he portrayed the developmental progression from moral code learning to principled behavior.

Even in the best of adults, he held, self-judgment results in defensive projection of actual or feared flaws onto others. This is the moral judgmental person, one who prescribes morality for the self and others based on the remnants of earlier childhood’s rule-driven morality. In Erikson’s concepts, the rule-imbuited, superego-honed conscience of childhood cannot be fully replaced as one develops. Rather, moralistic elements are absorbed into, and are partially superceded by, the high-minded ideology of adolescence. Later in life, in the best of development, ethical adulthood follows. On par with the absorption of morality into ideology, ethics does not totally replace either morality or ideology, but absorbs and partly converts both into principled behavior. The first growth of ethics proper appears in the identity–intimacy of loving and of creating a satisfactory life with another sexual being. Following this stage, ethics reaches its peak through solicitous acts in the identity–generativity stage of loving and caring for persons, products, and ideas.

In describing ethical adults, Erikson moved beyond the superego-honed morality of Freud’s thought, of Freudian precepts that retain childhood-based procriptions of “Thou shall not.” Erikson would have mature adults reach “outward” to others in ethical acts of love, care, and affirmation. He would have them move “upward” toward increasing consciousness of self and of the needs of others.

Erikson observed two problems about the highest level, the moral-ethical level, in which adults retain attributes of their childhood moral selves but
incorporate such morality, and the ideology of their adolescence, into the ethical commitments of their adult years. First, there is the difficulty of having grown up with moral-code learning that cannot be relinquished. Thus, one pole of adulthood is always the negative, moral pole whereas the other, for those who attain it, is the positive, ethical pole. Hence, principled adults are moral-ethical creatures who live simultaneously in the world of the moral, lawyer-like child and in the psyche of the ethical adult, not in the either/or position of one or the other. Further, to Erikson, morals only teach what we must say “no” to, while ethics expresses that which we affirm, or say “yes” to. Problems arise in that the adult can be highly unconscious of his or her moralistic side and of unknown motives for keeping it alive. And, since the moral and ethical poles strike bargains with each other, adults can engender or allow the worst conditions for others, sometimes under the guise of high standards.

The second problem with the moral-ethical level is that by middle life the adult’s moral pole tends to resume prominence. This is partly due to adults’ perceptions of a trend toward a social erosion in the core values which they and their generational cohort had adopted and sponsored since youth. Different values, imbued by contemporary, change-sponsoring adolescents, and young adults, begin to replace seniors’ values. As a result, middle-aged persons regressively pull back to their moral code, fighting to preserve their control. Such attempts at moral conservation promote rigidity. To Erikson (1964), “Step by step they go together: moralism with moral obedience, fanaticism with ideological devotion, and rigid conservatism with adult ethics” (p. 227). Such rigidity, based as it is on fear and on irrational anxieties about personal depletion and replacement, sabotages ethical behavior. The moral is ever useful, for it has rendered the adult reliable and conscientious, but it can lead the person to pettiness and cruelty under the easily-excusable trappings of morality. What any number of replacement-fearing middle-agers fail to see is that the very youths who are replacing older values with their own youthful standards will 1 day retreat and rigidity as well. For, “what is driven out by young rebellion is always reinstated by the dogmatism of middle age” (Erikson, 1958b, p. 140).

Such difficulties aside, Erikson wrote that the generative, ethical adult is the pinnacle of adult identity. Partly through his vehicle of Mahatma Gandhi, Erikson (1969) described a mutuality of equality that is Kantian; he stipulated treating others as autonomous ends, never as the means to an end. Here he transcended psychoanalysis to commit the naturalistic fallacy of converting an is to an ought. He wrote of subscription to the Hippocratic injunction of never intentionally harming another, defining harm as physical or mental harm or economic deprivation, as any behavior or omission that decreases another’s dignity, power, potential, or self-esteem. Ethical adults “maintain the world” positively, holding it in trust for future generations, caring deeply and responsibly for all children, for their own in a nurturing way, and for all others by civic contributions (Erikson, 1976, p. 16). In families, imprinting such strengths meant, to Erikson, adults’ attention to how they imbue trust in infants, and affirm positive values in children, in order to establish them carefully in life, in health, in positive consciences, and in faith.

“Should they not, also,” Erikson (1964) asked, “be given a chance to reach their ‘ultimate concern’ un­marr­ed by neurotic rootlessness?” (p. 100).

Nodding as he frequently did in the direction of belief in an Ultimate Power in the universe, Erikson’s rhetorical question points to a developmental need for faith. In fact, for Erikson, ethical behavior among adults, those he expected to transmit the gift of faith to children, was inseparable from such adults’ spiritual qualities. Here he departed radically from Freud. Freud proclaimed himself an atheist, one with the agenda of freeing the human from illusions about the existence of God. The mortal realm is all the human can expect; God and eternity are human projections and needs alone. This and other attributes, Erikson (1981) said, showed Freud’s persistence in probing for the “darkness behind consciousness” (p. 345). Instead of pursuing mental illness and atomistic breakdown, Erikson searched for health and wholeness; he pursued light and consciousness instead of darkness and unconsciousness; and he pondered the positives of faith instead of the negatives of disbelief. To him, faith is not objective, and belief is not rational, for limited human brains cannot reason their ways to God. But this did not render faith illogical, unimportant, obsolete, or illusory to Erikson. His various notes reveal his need to show psychoanalysis, itself largely unobjective, as having cold feet, as detached from its subjects and as far too willing to illustrate emotional difficulties in the adult disconnected from what he saw as each person’s need for faith. For an Erikson who insisted on working on the intricacies of thought instead of confining himself to any one, narrow discipline, this was yet another border terrain, one on the boundary between theology and
psychology. Erikson had his critics, but was undeterred by them. In his trans-Freudian thought, faith was none other than an attribute of psychological wholeness.

**FROM THE RATIONAL IN FREUD’S THOUGHT TO THE RATIONAL AND EMOTIONAL IN ERIKSON’S**

**Reason, Emotions, and Insight**

Exploring the id as the human’s instinctual core, the infantile rages Freud discovered gave credence to his conviction that the human is largely a creature with a “lower” nature (Erikson, 1982, p. 17). Even in adulthood, this nature is incompletely mastered; the adult is and remains a veritable pressure cooker of aggressive traits, self-serving aims, and primitive, instinctual drives. Yet, considering his view of the human as one who is driven by irrational instincts and forces, Freud excluded the emotional from much of his work. He made monumental efforts to propel a view of the person as a potentially rational being and to move humans in that direction. Examples of this are found in Freud’s view of the relationship between patients’ insight development and reason, and in his connection of prejudice with the absence of adequate rational power.

With respect to insight, Freud insisted that, at least in intelligent persons, self-awareness leads to reason and to rationally applied knowledge. Interpreting Freud, Erikson found that once patients had developed insight into the cause of their distress, Freud expected them to rationally cast aside the symptoms they then no longer needed. After all, their psychoanalyst had seen to the heart of their problems with flawless insight and acumen. In the Dora case, for example, Freud was annoyed about a young woman’s behavior, and was perplexed as to what kind of aid she wanted from him. Against Freud’s judgment, Dora had confronted her family with their secretive collusion with Mr. K., a married, adult friend of the family who had tried to seduce her when she was 14 and, again later, at age 16. Interpreting Freud’s response, Erikson (1964) held that Freud saw her behavior as an “act of revenge not compatible with the kind of insight which he had tried to convey to the patient” (p. 167). To Erikson, she wanted consideration from Freud that he did not provide, acceptance of her emotional repulsion and its effects in symptoms and confrontational behavior, as well as understanding, empathy, and some identification with her plight. She expected Freud to acknowledge that the adults in her circle had betrayed her. She had hoped that Freud would refuse to collude with her father who, because of his ongoing affair with Mrs. K., wished only to have Freud make Dora’s behavior reasonable so that his sexual pursuits would not be further contested (Erikson, 1964, pp. 167–174). To Erikson (1964), Dora wished, and needed, “verification” from her therapist (p. 170). Without such therapeutic faithfulness on Freud’s part, her own development of rational knowledge and insight were sorely inadequate to her needs.

Erikson understood that insight and knowledge alone do not result in disgorging symptoms, in abandoning some gut-level desire for retribution, or in releasing a sense of bone-deep anger toward hurtful others. Rage is emotional, as are its manifestations and sequelae, Erikson (1964) held. They too represent truth. And, that which a person knows emotionally can be far different from what he or she knows intellectually. The form and depth of the feelings aroused are not so readily detached from the unconscious or from remembered experience. They cannot be easily altered, like a change of travel plans or socks. Emotions deeply compel behavior.

At the collective level, Freud (1961) said that he proposed “to replace the affective basis of (human) obedience to civilization by a rational one” (p. 58). “Our best hope for the future,” he wrote, “is that intellect—the scientific spirit, reason—may in process of time establish a dictatorship in the mental life of man” (1989, p. 790). Freud (1961) observed that “the primacy of the intellect” did not exist in his era but would exist in some “distant, distant future” (p. 68). And it was essential to Freud that he work avidly toward that future. In keeping with his determination to develop a science of the human psychological apparatus that was equal to the hard sciences, Freud’s science of the mind had to become a science of the rational, at least in terms of the way intellectual power can illuminate and control the irrational. Freud (1961) wished to advance toward “ascribing purely rational reasons to the precepts of civilization” (p. 53).

Thus, although Freud worked with human feelings, with irrational mechanisms, and with unconscious motivational forces, he tried to lift these to the conscious, rational level. He would supplant the irrational with reason, just as he would replace religion, its wishes, superstitions, and projections, with a
Prejudice

Erikson held that Freud had written about the relationship between prejudice and identity on only one occasion. This was in a letter to the B’nai Brith in 1926. The reason was Freud’s effort to explain his bond with Judaism as an “inner identity” which was not based on race or religion, but on a common freedom from prejudices which narrow the use of the intellect” (Erikson, 1956, pp. 56–57). Erikson did not comment on Freud’s intentional linkage of two key concepts that he himself would elaborate, identity, and prejudice, nor did he consider Freud’s use of the term “identitaet” as the forerunner to his own identity construct. But in conceptualizing prejudice as an absence of openness to others, Freud anticipated Erikson: Prejudice stunts adult development. Freud believed that a psyche-intellect equation was at the basis of prejudice: It is intellectual narrowness that results in prejudice. Erikson disagreed. To him, an emotional, psyche-empathy equation largely defines the issue. An emotional inability or disinclination to engage the affect and mind so that it can reside within the social view and world of another leads to prejudice.

To Freud, the ability to remain intellectually open to differences in persons functions as a preventive; it forestalls closing out the world that feels incompatible with the self. Freud considered individual and cultural ideals and mentalities in this because, as he saw it, the latter hold overarching ideas that bond a community together and keep outsiders apart. He spoke to the ways in which religious institutions welcome and enfold their own members, while casting aside those who will not or cannot belong. Further, Freud implicitly recognized prejudice as that which occurs on the basis of ideal prototypes within each particular culture. This permits outsiders’ ideals to be degraded as inferior in attributes, achievement, and aspirations. To Freud (1961), the reasons for this were found in narcissism:

...the ideal (satisfies) ... participants in the culture (and) is thus of a narcissistic nature; it rests on their pride in what has already been successfully achieved. To make this satisfaction complete calls for a comparison with other cultures which have aimed at different achievements and have developed different ideals. On the strength of these differences every culture claims the right to look down on the rest. In this way cultural ideals become a source of discord and enmity between different cultural units ... (p. 16)

Freud did not elaborate such points, but he fueled Erikson’s ideas. It was not a far stretch between Freud’s notion of cultures’ narcissistic ideals, pride, and aspirations, and Erikson’s (1968) concept that any and all outsiders can be considered so far below the in-group’s standards that they are treated as unnecessary elements in the universe. In fact, applied to adults, Erikson’s most powerful identity concept is that of the “prejudiced adult” (Hoare, 2002, pp. 41–69). Prejudice, an attribute Erikson (1969) termed the “pseudospecies mentality,” is the largely irrational phenomenon that develops because humans hold membership in groups such as families, clans, ethnic divisions, races, and nations (p. 431). Erikson held that such groups sponsor certain cohesive views which inculcate identifications among members. Membership contains preferences and biases, complete with inclusion of like-others and exclusion of those who are different. At the societal level, national, cultural, and racial groups hold particular prejudices which, while they are largely unknown and unappreciated by others, divide the human species into potentially warring factions. Concerned about the danger of human annihilation that arrived with the invention of the nuclear bomb, Erikson (1975) illustrated the “human propensity” in every person, traceable to the tribe-based origins of humans’ first groupings, to lift personal confidence in identity, personal centrality, and competence by branding, “prejudging,” and excluding entire groups of other humans (p. 175). He understood human tendencies to experience guilt, and to project fears, blame, perceived ego deficits, and negative traits and inclinations on others, and to deflect these backward onto the self. At the group level, Erikson (1968) showed the largely unconscious human need to believe that all who are not members of their clan, tribe, or cult must be a “freakish and gratuitous invention of some irrelevant deity” (p. 41). This makes members of the “out” group minimally useful as a “screen” onto which the “in” tribe can project its negative identity elements and antipathies (p. 41). The negative identity is one’s id, a projection of which is useful and telling. It is always more comfortable to position the pathology of one’s impulses and rages among the attributes of others instead of within the self.

Erikson’s concerns were that prejudice in a time of sophisticated technology permits mass
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incarceration, dislocation, and even nuclear elimination of so-called dangerous groups. The human mind walls things off, thus making its self and its own world clearer, more real, better, and more understandable. When others are considered dangerous, particularly when they can be visually removed and bracketed away from consciousness as though they do not exist, their invisibility gives further justification for extinction. It is easier to avoid feeling for those one cannot see.

As to prejudice and the resolution of human conflict, there can be little doubt that the countering walls things off, thus making its self and its own world clearer, more real, better, and more understandable. When others are considered dangerous, particularly when they can be visually removed and bracketed away from consciousness as though they do not exist, their invisibility gives further justification for extinction. It is easier to avoid feeling for those one cannot see.

Thus, Erikson operated with premises that differed from Freud’s. Freud worked to support the superego and to bring the emotional under control, while Erikson wished to have humans learn to control their harshly judgmental superegos. Irrespective of the problems the superego sometimes creates, Freud (1961, p. 14) had held that the “strengthening of the super-ego is a most precious cultural asset,” for it had been developed and deployed by persons who were great “vehicles” of civilization. Erikson disagreed for, to him, superego was the culprit that had made the human its marionette. Instead, individual egos and the species-wide ego required strengthening. He tried to illustrate this, for individual and aggregate superegos had to be prevented from developing increasingly harsh coercions against self and others. In his view, those who somehow existed “outside” the in-group’s version of humanity too easily become “nameless,” then “meaningless,” then “strange,” and finally “wrong” (Erikson, 1966, p. 342). This led to vendettas that would likely end the species, considering the development of missiles and nuclear tools. Thus, all humans had to understand their own unconscious tendencies and the roles of their emotions and superegos in prejudice. All humans in their various groupings had to understand that they could no longer deny the “status of reciprocal ethics to those outside” (Erikson, 1963b, p. 417).

In his final publication about prejudice Erikson (1985) expressed his hope that threats of a “nuclear winter” and “species-wide destruction” would be reversed (p. 213). Humans had gotten themselves into a “pervasive craziness,” he wrote, one that led them to become “adjusted” to an unthinkable specter (p. 214). If anything, this was maladjustment. The Erikson (1958b, p. 193) who had seen the Renaissance as a large scale “ego revolution par excellence” pressed for another revolution, that of finding within and between each person, family, race, culture, and nation the common bond of a human childhood. Particularly, he pressed prejudiced adults, and that means all adults, to engage their intellects and their empathy, and to set aside their harsh superegos in order to locate and protect what he hoped was still a childhood of the species, a species that would deter itself from nuclear annihilation while still in its youth. At the end of his life, Erikson saw some positive changes. He wrote about
the movement he saw toward inclusiveness, to that of a species-wide sense of connected adults.

Erikson did not provide reasons for what we can only call his “hope” that humans were moving closer together and might avert a wholesale tragedy. And we cannot yet know the outcome of Freud’s claim that aggression is encoded in the species. But we can wonder whether Freud would have so easily provided reasons for the cyclic nature of wars if he had, living in a later era, seen the possibility of complete species destruction by nuclear means.

CONCLUSION

Erikson’s revisions of Freudian thought were based on his view of the human who moves upward in consciousness, outward to the social world, and forward throughout the lifespan. Such thinking is based on wholeness and health, and on concepts of how these can be developed in the self and others. He countered Freudian biological determinism and mechanistic rigidity. He opposed reductionism, depicting the person in the stream of ongoing life, a human with changing content who lives in complex, sometimes resource-rich, contexts. To counter reductionism, he wrote in terms of competing, dialectic polarities that engage the developing person throughout life. Countering static Newtonian and Darwinian thinking, he wrote of the human who exists in the context of a dynamic, organic life that continues to fuel development into and through adulthood. Evolution, he held, could be placed under adaptive control. He converted a veritable desert of Freudian adulthood to a view of the adult who engages with unique psychodynamic content and develops mature strengths and competencies. In this, he charted the adult as an intricate person who is much more than the mere absence of the Freudian-based negatives of childhood. He moved from Freud’s view that moral qualities are omnipresent and valuable adult attributes, to concepts showing adults as those who are potentially moral and ethical. In these and other respects Erikson altered the notion of adulthood as a linear time band that occurs on a fixed platform of life, to adulthood as a sequence that shows developmental unfolding, changing strengths, and intranarrative continuity with earlier life. He gave credibility to the emotional in human life, knowing the human as rational and irrational. Treading where more cautious psychoanalysts would not go, Erikson moved close to the theological in depicting the human need for faith, and he committed the naturalistic fallacy of saying what we need to do to provide for the mental health of others and of self.

To Erikson (1981), Freud’s was a negative system. Its author had persisted in searching for the “structural divisions” in the psyche—of sickness, evil, and controlling passions (p. 345). Shifting the view, Erikson reversed Freud’s sequence in which clinical pathology informed normalcy to one that moved from the normal to the abnormal. Erikson also changed the psychosexual perspective to a psychosocial view. To the biopsychological model of human, Erikson added the third component, that of the social. In so doing, he converted an intrapersonal orientation to an intra- and interpersonal view in which external culture and society enter the psyche to preside over norms, views, adaptations, and behavior.

Thus, although Erikson was a conflict theorist, his agenda was to show the basis for mental health and to illustrate normal developmental content and progression throughout life. Irrespective of its naturalistic fallacy, Erikson’s viewpoint of what it is that adults owe each other, their children, and future generations, bears serious consideration. He held that contemporary times can ill afford to simply describe normalcy and to treat only the mental aberrations. Individual and species’ development depend on understanding and nurturing that which is normal, on supporting psychological health, and on fostering human connections between and among all others on a planet that, day by day, grows ever smaller.

REFERENCES


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