The Wisdom of the Ego

George E. Vaillant

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The Wisdom of the Ego

For Leigh

whose wisdom, love, and companionship
bring much joy

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Introduction

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n.
John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Our lives are at times intolerable. At times we cannot bear reality. At such times our minds play tricks on us. Our minds distort inner and outer reality so that an observer might accuse us of denial, self-deception, even dishonesty. But such mental defenses creatively rearrange the sources of our conflict so that they become manageable and we may survive. The mind's defenses—like the body's immune mechanisms—protect us by providing a variety of illusions to filter pain and to allow self-soothing.

Often such emotional and intellectual dishonesty is not only healthy but also mature and creative. Such defensive self-deception reflects the ego's—the integrated brain's—best synthetic effort at coping with life events that otherwise would be overwhelming. Equally important, such self-deception evolves throughout our lives. Our development does not end with childhood but continues through adulthood. The maladaptive defenses of adolescence can evolve into the virtues of maturity. This psychic alchemy helps to explain the resilience of individuals who are abused and disadvantaged during the first decades of life and yet become valued and useful adults. In short, our ego's defenses can be creative, healthy, comforting, and coping. Yet when we are observers—rather than users—of defenses, they often strike us as downright peculiar.

Sixty years ago the physiologist Walter B. Cannon wrote a landmark book, *The Wisdom of the Body*, in which he described the invisible response of the human digestive tract to distress.[1] He clearly identified the checks and balances employed by our bodies' para-

sympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems to maintain *homeostasis*—the term he used to describe a body at peace with itself. In his research Cannon capitalized on what was then a recent invention, X-ray photography, to monitor hitherto invisible physiological processes. Echoing Cannon, I have called this book *The Wisdom of the Ego,* because I believe the invisible responses of the human mind to distress—the defenses deployed by the ego—are as healing, and as necessary to health, as the autonomic nervous system that he did so much to elucidate.

Like Cannon, I capitalize on a recent scientific advance—in my case the availability of records of prospectively gathered human lives. I draw my evidence from the Study of Adult Development, in which large numbers of people have been followed from adolescence through their adult lives. Such prolonged study helps to render visible the healing power of the ego's defenses. In addition, the rich database of hundreds of lives provides statistical support for generalizations made from individual lives. Because one question of interest is the relationship of the ego's adaptive self-deceptions to human creativity, I also examine the life histories of several creative artists.

In this book, then, I weave together three threads. One thread is the mind's—the ego's—modes of self-deception and denial, sometimes referred to as mechanisms of defense. To use a Piagetian term, the deployment of such defenses reflects our adult efforts to *accommodate* to life. The use of ego mechanisms of defense alters the perception of both internal and external reality; and often, like hypnosis, use of defenses compromises other facets of cognition. Awareness of instinctual wishes may be greatly diminished; antithetical wishes may be passionately adhered to; our consciences or our awareness of other people may be obliterated. I shall offer evidence that a person's choice of defenses is critical to mental health.

The second thread is an examination of creativity—the peculiarly human capacity for putting in the world what was not there before. Such a capacity for creativity seems closely interwoven with the alchemy of the ego to bring order and meaning out of chaos and distress. Such creative capacity can allow grief to be mitigated by an esoteric hobby, and it can allow self-deception to be viewed as a virtue rather than a sin. In Piagetian terminology, creativity reflects how we *assimilate* life, take life in, make it our own, and share it with others. Creativity is how we experience life and pour it forth.

The book's third thread is the unfolding of adult development.

The study of lifetimes allows reexamination of cross-sectional views of adult development. Such study permits us to see how people bud and flower, and how human caterpillars evolve into butterflies. It allows us to trace how the capacity for intimacy makes possible the commitment essential for a gratifying career identity, and how such fulfillment from a career makes possible a capacity for generative care. It also allows us to see that this developmental sequence of love-to-work-to-care appears to hold for both men and women.

More important, prospective study of lifetimes demonstrates the resilience and the continuing maturation of adults. Freud diminished human hope by suggesting that the first five years of life were destiny. The evidence I adduce in this book restores hope. The data from the Study of Adult Development demonstrate that mental health and choice of defense are *not* static. Rather, choice of defense may evolve throughout adult life and may transmute irritating grains of sand into pearls. Nor is choice of defense determined by social class, education, or gender.

The modern psychoanalytic use of the term *ego* encompasses the adaptive and executive aspects of the human brain: the ability of the mind to integrate, master, and make sense of inner and outer reality. Or, in Freud's words, "We have formed the idea that in each individual there is a coherent organization of mental processes; and we call this his *ego*."[2] The term *ego* addresses the capacity of the integrated mind to accommodate and assimilate the world.

On the one hand, personality development and maturity occur through the interaction between the person and his or her social environment. On the other hand, as John Milton reminds us, experience is not what happens to the mind (and heart) but what the mind (and heart) does with experience. How the mind manipulates experience is at the core of ego development.

We are accustomed to thinking of ego development as something that occurs in childhood. The developmental psychologist Robert Kegan has described watching the ego development of a young child as follows: "Being in another's presence while she so honestly labors in an astonishingly intimate activity—the activity of making sense—is somehow very touching." Such development, as Kegan notes, is social: "Our survival and development depend on our capacity to recruit the invested attention of others to us."[3] To develop, a child needs a loving caretaker, one who creates for the child what D. W. Winnicott has

called a "holding environment"—that is, an environment that provides the child with the secure foundation it needs to mature and to develop a sense of self. Eventually, the caretaker's love comes to dwell inside the child, where it supports the capacity of the ego's self-deceptions to turn life's leaden moments into gold, as it were, instead of into self-detrimental distortions and illusions.

But this book is not about children. Although Kegan expresses a fear that adolescents and adults less frequently "display themselves in these touching and elemental ways," he realizes it may only be that in adults "we are less able to see these ways for what they are."[4] This book is about adults who have exposed their entire lives to scrutiny and have been seen in similarly vulnerable and intimate activities. This book is about middle-aged men and women wrestling with learning how to love, with making meaning, with reordering chaos, and with discovering, often inadvertently, how to put in the world what was not there before. Their life stories offer example after example in which maturation and the internalization of a holding environment occur in adulthood, not in childhood.

Finally, quite unashamedly, I wish to argue for preserving the baby of psychoanalysis even as we discard its bath water. I wish to remind the reader that we have limbic systems as well as cerebral cortices, and that the brain cannot be separated from the heart. This book is an effort to undo some of the excesses of the so-called cognitive revolution, of the medicalization of psychiatry, and of what has been called the "decade of the brain." Howard Gardner, in his lucid history of the cognitive revolution, notes the deliberate decision of cognitive scientists to exclude certain factors that "would unnecessarily complicate the cognitive-scientific enterprise. These factors include the influence of affective factors or emotions, the contribution of historical and cultural factors, and the role of the background context in which particular actions or thoughts occur."[5] *The Wisdom of the Ego* reflects my studied effort to recomplicate such an enterprise.

The prospective study of human lives makes it possible to look closely at psychological experiences and to trace their similarities and differences in large groups of men and women. In the words of the psychiatrist John Nemiah, "The difficulty many people have in accepting the validity of psychodynamic concepts lies not in their lack of a cognitive ability to understand the theory, but in their incapacity or unwillingness to observe the clinical facts on which the theory is based.

Those who reject psychodynamic theory refuse to take subjective human psychological experiences as phenomena worthy of serious attention and study, and consequently they cannot or will not allow themselves to observe them."[6] This book, using data from the prospective, long-term study of many lives, renders those subjective, human psychological experiences visible to even the most intransigent empiricist.

Throughout the book, I will point out the distortions that occur between the actual and the remembered past, between the artist's life and her creative product, and between current reality and our perceptions of it. My intent will be to make the hidden visible, and to retrieve the dynamic "unconscious" first popularized by Freud and Janet from the parochial grip of the "Freudian" humanists so that it can be reinserted into the grasp of natural scientists. It is time for the ego and its defenses to be seen as facets of psychobiological reality, not as articles of psychoanalytic faith.

I

Why Praise the Human Ego?

The striving to master, to integrate, to make sense of experience is not one ego function among many but the essence of the ego.

Jane Loevinger

Not long ago at an amusement park in California, I viewed the riders on the loop-the-loop roller coaster with astonishment. As I watched the excited passengers gather speed, sweep up the loop, and hang suspended upside down with their arms waving, I saw that for them the experience was one of joy, release, and exhilaration. Yet I imagined that for myself such a ride would be anything but enjoyable. I contemplated only the physical assault that might ensue. The stress of such a roller coaster ride might fill my bursae with calcium, crater the lining of my stomach with ulcers, deposit cholesterol within the walls of my coronary arteries, and compromise my immune system with an outpouring of corticosteroids. The experience, I reflected, might take years off my life.

By what alchemy had the brains of the laughing riders mitigated an experience that would have provoked in me only fear and distress? The difference between us, had I ventured to join them, would not have been in our understanding of the risks. Most of the time, after all, nothing really bad happens in amusement parks. I *know* that. Nor would the difference have been in our conscious understanding of stress management. I am, after all, a professor of psychiatry, and I understand quite a lot about stress. I can breathe deeply and visualize placid, blue lagoons as well as the next person. The difference would not have been in the external stress we experienced, for we would all have shared the exposed helplessness of hanging upside down a hundred

feet above the ground. The difference would have been in the ways our minds, our egos, *distorted* the experience.

The ego is an elusive metaphor. Psychologists and psychiatrists are hard put to define a good ego in objective terms or to describe how they would go about measuring it. In part this is because our conceptions of mental health exist as theoretical constructs and not as operational behaviors. But even when we take time to define what we mean by mental health, the ego still remains the mysterious god in the machine.

The wisdom of the ego referred to in the title of this book is not the wisdom of vanity but the widom of the integrated adaptive central nervous system. The concept of the ego conveys the mind's capacity to integrate inner and outer reality, to blend past and present, and to synthesize ideas with feelings. I use the term *ego* as Sigmund Freud used it, to convey the self-preservative executive ego, the agile rider of Plato's two horses: selfless conscience and selfish instincts. However, the ego also encompasses all those complex behaviors in which our brains can engage but in which the finest computers in the world cannot. For example, the recognition of faces, of signatures, of counterfeit Renoirs—tasks well beyond the power of computers—are readily performed by an only modestly well trained human brain.

Originally, Freud described the ego as analogous to Plato's horseman trying to ride two horses at once. Goaded on by the selfish impulses of the id, hemmed in by the moral constraints of the superego, rebuffed by reality, the ego struggles to cope and to reduce the forces that work on it into some kind of harmony. The ego institutes delay in our instinctual behavior: Look before you leap. In so doing, it can "neutralize" instinctual urges. Usually this occurs as a gradual transformation, but in cases of religious conversion the development of the capacity for instinctual delay may be sudden.

Over time Freud's model of the ego has evolved. What is outside of us is as threatening as what is within. Interpersonal relationships and external reality are now considered just as important to unconscious conflict as the id and the superego. Thus the ego must control four horses: desire, conscience, people, and reality.

Modern attempts to define the ego include the work of neuropsychologists like Michael Gazzaniga, who studies patients whose left and right brain hemispheres have been surgically separated. Gazzaniga tells us: "Studies on split-brain patients have revealed the presence of

a system in the left hemisphere that interprets these actions, moods, and thought processes that are generated by groups of modules that are acting outside the realm of our conscious awareness. The left-brain 'interpreter' constructs theories about these actions and feelings and tries to bring order and unity to our conscious lives. It is a special system that works independently from language processes and appears to be unique to the human brain and related to the singular capacity of the brain to make causal inferences."[1]

But Gazzaniga is really talking about "self." The self has subjective experiences, the self has thoughts and bodily feelings. The ego does not have experiences; it is an organizing mental apparatus that is the sum of the integrated central nervous system. It remains invisible and can be identified only through its footprints. We can visualize and appreciate the results of ego function, but the ego will forever remain an abstraction.

Nor is ego just for adaptation and mental synthesis. Its wisdom also encompasses defense and adult development and creativity. The ultimate developmental ego tasks are wisdom, the fusion of care and justice, and the capacity to consider the needs, rights, and past histories of others even as we pay heed to those same facets in ourselves. Such ego tasks involve not only the mastery of intimate relationships and identification with mentors but the capacity to compare, and to sustain paradox and ambivalence. The ego allows us to distinguish that which we must gather the courage to change from that which we must gain the serenity to accept.

I certainly do not use the term *ego* to convey narcissism. There is, after all, a world of difference between being self-centered (being egotistical) and being centered in the self (possessing ego strength). To survive we must find the important realm that exists between selflessness and selfishness, between reckless disregard for self and paralyzing self-absorption. Thus, ego strength encompasses self-care, and self-care knows neither selflessness nor selfishness. Rather, self-care must employ the long-range view and expand into areas where one can aggrandize self without diminishing others. The adaptive ego must learn to cast its bread upon the waters so that the bread will return tenfold; it must learn to spin straw into gold. But as with the case of the roller coaster riders, such an ego must also develop a capacity for judicious self-deception. And, as we shall see, whether such self-deception leads to art or to insanity, the alchemy of the ego is nothing short of miraculous.

Finally, ego development is not dissimilar to moral development. The poet Edward Arlington Robinson wrote to a friend, "The world is not a 'prison house' but a kind of spiritual kindergarten where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks."[2] Change D to E and those kindergarten blocks spell EGO as easily as GOD. Consider the difference between the paranoid and the altruist. Both claim to discern intuitively how other people feel. The difference is that the altruist is right and the paranoid sees only an image of himself. Yet over time paranoids can develop into altruists. As adaptive capacity matures, paranoia evolves into empathy, projection evolves into altruism, and sinner evolves into saint. Ego development reflects our ongoing striving to allow the self-diminishing sin of *projection* to evolve toward the self-expanding virtue of *empathy*. This process of ego development simultaneously involves self-deception and the growth of wisdom and creativity.

The ego possesses a remarkable capacity for life-preserving distortion. As I have already suggested, such distortion can take the form of projection, of altruism, or, as in the case of the happy roller coaster riders, of dissociation. As with the magic of the placebo, as with the veneration of the primitive shaman, as with the madness of crowds, and as with the power of art, man's capacity for ingenious, creative, often healing self-deception seems infinite. Indeed, what the brilliant physiologist Walter B. Cannon called "the wisdom of the body" with its self-regulating homeostasis may be no match for the benign alchemy of the mind. Many environmental stimuli endanger our health only because of the symbolic meaning we attach to them. Other stimuli, like roller coasters, are made safe only by unconscious mechanisms of adaptation. The "right stuff" epitomized by the famous American test pilot Chuck Yeager was not just a function of willpower, stress management, and skillful flight instruction. Many of us could never tolerate becoming pilots, and many pilots could not tolerate becoming test pilots. Even test pilots themselves marveled at Yeager's reflex "cool." For had Yeager paid full attention to his inner and outer reality, he too would have been afraid. But had he ignored such reality for even a moment, he would have died. The wisdom of his ego lay in creating an optimal balance between self-deception and accurate appreciation of inner and outer reality. In the language of every day such a delicate balance is called *coping*, but it is coping of a very special kind.