



Thomistic Thought and Contemporary Psychoanalysis

Michael Stock

Volume 19, Number 2, 1963

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020048ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020048ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (print)

1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Stock, M. (1963). Thomistic Thought and Contemporary Psychoanalysis. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 19(2), 350–360. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020048ar>

Thomistic Thought and Contemporary Psychoanalysis *

When a group is organized under the title of 'Catholic Psychiatrists,' it suggests that a therapeutic art may be specified in some way by a religious conviction. It suggests that there is a Catholic psychiatry distinct in some modality from other kinds of psychiatries. Now it is doubtful that anyone would look for the specifying difference in the therapeutic art itself. The classification of psychiatric disorders, the techniques of diagnosis and the prescriptions for therapy, the formulations of theories of psychodynamics and psychic structure, and all of the science and art entailed in psychiatry seem to belong properly and exclusively to an order of knowledge acquired by experience, experiment and reasonable reflection on a purely human and natural level. At this level, there would no more seem to be a Catholic psychiatry than there is a Catholic mathematics or a Catholic agriculture.

If there is a valid modification of psychiatry by which we can meaningfully term it 'Catholic,' it would seem to bear on the spirit with which we apply the art. Dynamically, a psychiatrist can be motivated by the charity of Christ; prudentially, he can be guided by the norms of Christian morality. This implies that the application of a therapeutic art is structured in a broader context of thought, intention and activity. In this broader context, questions might be raised, for instance, about the position healing holds in a larger hierarchy of values, or about the position specific techniques hold in relation to other values which are to be attained or, perhaps, also, sacrificed. In the broader context of psychiatry, questions might be proposed such as: what is the ultimate goal of healing, and, therefore, what is the nature of man, and then, what is man's destiny. At this level of questioning, Catholic thought will necessarily have something to say, as will, indeed, whatever theological or philosophical context a man who is a therapist might have adopted. These are questions which, in a strict sense, cannot be evaded, for even evasion signifies a stance. It is according to the answers he gives to these questions that a man can call his psychiatry 'Catholic,' or perhaps materialistic, or existential, or by the name of whatever regitive mode of thought he has embraced.

At this level, Catholic thought in the past confronted Freud's psychoanalysis with marked hostility. Whether or not the hostility

* "Reprinted from the *Bulletin of the Guild of Catholic Psychiatrists*, vol.IX, n.2, April, 1962, with permission of the editor."

extended to questions of the practical efficacy of Freudian methods, to questions of psychic structure and dynamics, and the like, is not to the point here. What seems evident is that the animosity was generated in principle because of the ramifications of psychoanalysis into questions of morality and religion, human nature and human destiny. Then, in the course of time and with more or less marked difficulty, the many elements of genuine value in psychoanalysis were extricated from the context of materialism and determinism in which they had been developed, and adopted wholeheartedly by many Catholic psychiatrists, either as their preferred form of therapy or, at the least, as contributing most significant insights into all of the problems psychiatry handles. Today, while relics of the earlier opposition still remain, it is no longer unthinkable for Catholics to adopt distinctively Freudian positions.

With a view to enlarging Thomistic psychology along the lines of contemporary research, the present author published a short paper several years ago, in which he suggested some of the ways in which Freudian concepts might be profitably worked into a context of Thomistic psychology.¹ Although the paper outlined the points of fundamental cleavage between Thomistic thought and Freudian thought, this was not its main purpose ; this was the obvious. The main purpose was to show the often surprising agreement between Thomistic and Freudian concepts, particularly at the level of straight psychology. While St. Thomas never knew the unconscious as Freud did, he was keen enough not to close off his psychological formulations against development by new ideas and new methods of research. In point of fact, he noted in a more or less intuitive way, the properties of the *id* and the *superego*, the role of drives in psychic life, and the fact of unconscious thought processes and motivations, and on a number of other issues of lesser moment, he expressed himself in a way which would not seem foreign to contemporary depth psychology. On the strength of these Thomistic insights, it seemed possible and profitable to work on expanding Thomistic psychology with psychoanalytic materials.

Now, within the last twenty-five years, dating largely from the publication of Anna Freud's *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*², psychoanalysis itself has shown remarkable growth in new directions, which, if not abandoning basic Freudian positions (and it is claimed that none of these has been abandoned) are certainly modifying them in some radical ways. This development is within the framework of 'orthodox' Freudianism ; it is not understood as a revisionist move-

1. Michael STOCK, O. P., *Thomistic Psychology and Freud's Psychoanalysis*, *The Thomist*, April, 1958.

2. Anna FREUD, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, 1954, The Hogarth Press, London.

ment. Nevertheless, it gives psychoanalysis a new look, and a look far more congenial to, for instance, Thomistic psychology. If a profitable integration could be made even between Freud and St. Thomas, the value accruing from an integration of St. Thomas and some of the more recent psychoanalytic theorists promises to be immeasurably greater. It is the purpose of this paper to try to point up some of the more recent developments in psychoanalysis which make the whole science more amenable to integration with Thomistic psychology, and to urge, if possible, interest and enthusiasm in the progress of such integration.¹

Let us begin for the sake of comparison, with some of Freud's judgments about the essential constituents of human nature. For Freud, the essence of man, his center of gravity, was the *id*. This was the prime constitutive of human nature. Compared to the *id*, the *ego* was a derived function, dominated by the *id* in all its activities, subservient to the *id* and subject even to a kind of violent oppression.

In 1900, Freud was writing :

Owing to this belated arrival of the secondary processes, the essence of our being, consisting of unconscious wish-impulses, remains something which cannot be grasped or inhibited by the preconscious and its part is once and for all restricted to indicating the most appropriate paths for the wish-impulses originating in the unconscious. These unconscious wishes represent for all subsequent psychic strivings a compulsion to which they must submit themselves, although they may perhaps endeavor to divert them and to guide them to superior aims.²

As Lipps has said, the unconscious must be accepted as the general basis of the psychic life. The unconscious is the larger circle which includes the smaller circle of the conscious . . . The unconscious is the true psychic reality . . .³

1. It may be observed that the focus was shifted in the course of the preceding paragraphs, from Catholic thought to Thomistic thought, and, in particular, to Thomistic psychology. This was done with a purpose but it may be well, too, to try to obviate possible misconceptions. It is not being suggested that Thomistic thought is the equivalent of Catholic thought. The latter is both broader and narrower ; broader because it includes other systems of theology, based on systems of philosophy other than that of St. Thomas Aquinas. Narrower, because it does not properly extend to many questions of purely philosophical (or scientific) import, which would form an integral part of the Thomistic synthesis. The reason the shift was made from the relation of Catholic thought and psychoanalysis to the relation of Thomistic thought and psychoanalysis was partly because Thomistic thought holds a special and privileged position within the sphere of Catholic thought and thus there is a certain validity in treating one in terms of the other, and partly because the Thomistic tradition is the one which the author espouses, and the one he is particularly interested in elaborating with psychoanalytic findings.

2. FREUD, *The Interpretation of Dreams, The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, Ed. A. A. Brill, p.536, 1938, Random House, Inc., New York.

3. *Ibid.*, p.542.

Nine years later, he was ready to assert a functional value for the *ego*, and he held to this view throughout his career.

Analysis replaces the process of repression, which is an automatic and excessive one, by a temperate and purposeful control on the part of the highest mental faculties. In a word, analysis replaces repression by condemnation. This seems to bring us the long-looked-for evidence that consciousness has biological function, and that with its entrance upon the scene an important advantage is secured.¹

But analysis enables the mature *ego*, which by this time has attained a greater strength, to review these old repressions, with the result that some are lifted, while others are accepted but reconstructed from more solid material.²

Nevertheless, the *ego* role was entirely subservient to the goals of the *id* and subject to *id* domination even in its distinctive operations. Its function was totally *id* directed.

From the other point of view, however, we see this same *ego* as a poor creature owing service to three masters and constantly menaced by three several dangers: from the external world, from the libido of the *id*, and from the severity of the *super-ego* . . . Like the dweller in a borderland that it is, the *ego* tries to mediate between the world and the *id*, to make the *id* comply with the world's demands and, by means of muscular activity, to accommodate the world to the *id*'s desires . . . It is not only the ally of the *id*; it is also a submissive slave who courts the love of his master . . . Its position midway between the *id* and reality tempts it only too often to become sycophantic, opportunist and false, like a politician who sees the truth but wants to keep his place in popular favor.³

Helpless in either direction, the *ego* defends itself vainly, alike against the instigations of the murderous *id* and against the reproaches of the punishing conscience.⁴

. . . the conduct through life of what we call our *ego* is essentially passive, and . . . we are 'lived' by unknown and uncontrollable forces.⁵

The reason for the subservience is evident: the *ego* is essentially a derived structure, arising out of the *id* and owing all its force and energy to it.

We shall now look upon the mind of an individual as an unknown and unconscious *id*, upon whose surface rests the *ego*, developed from its nucleus the Pcpt-system. . . . The *ego* is not sharply separated from the *id*; its lower portion merges into it.⁶

1. FREUD, *Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy*, Coll. Papers, Vol.3, p.285, 1959, Basic Books, Inc., New York.

2. FREUD, *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*, Coll. Papers, vol.5, p.329.

3. FREUD, *The Ego and the Id*, pp.82-83, 1955, The Hogarth Press, Ltd., London.

4. *Ibid.*, p.78.

5. *Ibid.*, p.27.

6. *Ibid.*, p.28.

It is easy to see that the *ego* is that part of the *id* which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world acting through the Pept-Cs :¹

... normally control over the approaches to motility devolves upon it. Thus in its relation to the *id* it is like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse, with this difference, that the rider seeks to do so with his own strength while the *ego* uses borrowed forces.²

What we arrive at is, in effect, a human nature whose principle component, from which other components are derived and to which they are ancillary, is the blind locus of instinctual drives whose satisfaction constitutes the heart of man's psychic life. The basic law of life is the pleasure principle ; the reality principle is a subordinate law, whose function subserves the pleasure principle.

For example :

Then when we find further that the activity of even the most highly developed mental apparatus is subject to the pleasure-principle, i.e. is automatically regulated by feelings belonging to the pleasure-pain ' series, we can hardly reject the further postulate that these feelings reflect the manner in which the process of mastering stimuli takes place.³

As was mentioned above, the publication of *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* in 1936 marked a new emphasis in psychoanalysis. In the opening pages of the book, Anna Freud defends a definition of psychoanalysis which is broader than " the new discoveries relating to the unconscious psychic life, i.e. the study of repressed instinctual impulses, affects and phantasies." She insists on a psychoanalysis which is primarily interested in the study of the *ego* and *ego-institutions*.⁴

A few years later, with the publication of Heinz Hartmann's *Ego Psychology and the Problem of Adaptation*, psychoanalysis was ready to take a marked step forward, from being a psychology limited to " the study of pathology and of phenomena which are on the border of

1. *Ibid.*, p.29.

2. *Ibid.*, p.30.

3. FREUD, *Instincts and their Vicissitudes*, *Coll. Papers*, vol.4, p.64.

4. *Op. cit.*, pp.3-4. Anna Freud attributes this newer definition of psychoanalysis to her father's work, in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Similarly, Heinz Hartmann, in *Ego Psychology and the Problem of Adaptation*, p.4, gives Sigmund Freud the credit for the new approach in psychoanalysis. There is no reason to doubt the validity of these tributes ; Freud himself was probably the one who indicated the fresh direction psychoanalysis might take. However, his estimate of the role of the *ego*, as presented in *The Ego and the Id* (see the citations in the text) were written after the books to which Anna Freud alludes, and do not indicate a realization of the role the *ego* would be given after Hartmann's book.

normal psychology and psychopathology" to "a general psychology in the broadest sense of the word."¹

This step forward entailed not only a fresh look at the scope of properly psychoanalytic interests, but also a restatement of some of the basic concepts. Between *The Ego and the Id* in 1922 and *Ego Psychology and the Problem of Adaptation* in 1939, the concept of human nature was profoundly, and felicitously, modified. Man's life is no longer essentially a life of instinctual striving, with *ego* functions dominated by and constrained to the service of instinctual satisfaction. Hartmann has neglected nothing that was learned about the vital and pervasive influence of the instincts in human life, but he has subordinated the instinctual factor in man to the adaptive and adapted factors, and these latter are primarily and specifically features of *ego* functioning.

Hartmann opens his discussion of *ego* psychology² with a statement about the conflict-free *ego* sphere, and this leads him directly to a consideration of the concept of adaptation.³ From this point on, adaptation takes over as the central theme in the light of which psychoanalytic theories take on new significance and mesh in with "surface" psychology, as well as with biology and sociology.

In the processes of adaptation, the *ego* is the crucial agency.

In the course of evolution, described here as a process of progressive "internalization," there arises a central regulating factor, usually called the "inner world," which is interpolated between the receptors and the effectors. We are familiar with it in human adults as one of the *ego*'s regulating factors . . .

The biological usefulness of the inner world in adaptation, in differentiation, and in synthesis becomes obvious even in a brief glance at the biological significance of thought processes . . .

Let us now consider more closely the relation of the function of thinking, this foremost representative of the internalization process, to the tasks of adaptation, synthesis, and differentiation. In this connection we will have to disregard much that we know about thinking—for instance, its being energized by desexualized libido . . .

Intelligence involves an enormous extension and differentiation of reaction possibilities, and subjects the reactions to its selection and control . . .

Clearly, this whole broad area of functions pertains to the *ego*. I would hesitate, however, to equate it—as some do—with the *ego* . . .

In any case, the emergence of intelligence is a decisive step in the development of purposive behavior . . .

We have just spoken about the biological function of thinking, and we take it for granted that it is necessary to know, to assimilate, and to

1. Heinz HARTMANN, *op. cit.*, p.4.

2. *Op. cit.*, c.1.

3. *Ibid.*, c.2, see esp. p.22.

purposively influence reality. We do not share the malaise of our time, characterized by the fear that a surfeit of intelligence and knowledge will impoverish and denaturalize man's relationships to the world . . .

It is crucial for the *ego* that it can use rational regulations while it simultaneously takes into account the irrationality of other mental achievements . . .¹

Hartmann does not lend himself to brief summation in his own words, as Freud so frequently does, but the import of his thinking can be gathered from the citations above. He seems to conceive adaptation as the primary law of human life, and the intelligence function of the *ego* as the primary tool of human adaptation. The influence of the instincts is never denied, but the discharge of instinctual energies is no longer the central feature of human life. Freud, of course, appreciated this relationship between *ego* and *id* too, but seemed to propose it more as a future hope than an existing reality.

We may insist as much as we like that the human intellect is weak in comparison with human instincts, and be right in doing so. But nevertheless there is something peculiar about this weakness. The voice of the intellect is a soft one, but it does not rest until it has gained a hearing. Ultimately, after endlessly repeated rebuffs, it succeeds. This is one of the few points in which one may be optimistic about the future of mankind, but in itself it signifies not a little. And one can make it a starting-point for yet other hopes. The primacy of the intellect certainly lies in the far, far, but still probably not infinite, distance.²

Central to Hartmann's conception of the *ego-id* relationship is the independence of the reality principle from the pleasure principle and the autonomy of the *ego*. The *ego* is influenced by the *id*, but not determined by it, nor dependent on it in its genesis and function.

Let us now return to the principles of regulation. At this point we are interested only in that one of their aspects which can help us to demonstrate the relative independence of *ego* development . . .

We understand that the mental apparatus must search the external world for pleasure possibilities as soon as its needs exceed a certain measure and can no longer be satisfied by fantasy . . .

But what we call the reality principle implies something essentially new, namely, the function of anticipation . . .

The ability to renounce an immediate pleasure-gain in order to secure a greater one in the future cannot be derived from the pleasure principle alone . . .

We assume that *ego* development enters this process as an independent variable, though naturally the *ego* function involved may secondarily yield pleasure . . .³

1. *Ibid.*, c.5, pp.57-72.

2. FREUD, *The Future of an Illusion*, p.93

3. HARTMANN, *op. cit.*, pp.41-43.

The individual does not acquire all the apparatuses which are put in the service of the *ego* in the course of development : perception, motility, intelligence, etc., rest on constitutional givens. These components of " *ego* constitution " deserve our attention just as much as the components of drive constitution.¹

A consequence of placing the adaptation point of view in the center of psychoanalytic considerations is a fresh focusing of attention on psychosocial aspects. If adaptation is a primary human goal, man's relations with other men — perhaps the most significant factors of the world to which he must adapt — become of critical importance in understanding human nature. Again, as Hartmann points out, Freud was not unaware of this ; nevertheless, his main emphasis in the question of human development was on psychosexual progress. Contemporary psychoanalysis has kept the Freudian formulations on libido development, but again has shifted the focus of the whole picture, so that now the psychosocial aspects seem to be more prominent.

Erik Erikson expresses this position well (incidentally affirming the primary position of the *ego* in the human constitution.)

Psychoanalysis today is implementing the study of the *ego*, the core of the individual. It is shifting its emphasis from the concentrated study of the conditions which blunt and distort the individual *ego* to the study of the *ego's* roots in social organization.²

For him, the essence of a healthy and happy life lies in constructing and maintaining an *ego*-identity. This *ego*-identity is based on the feeling of personal identity, which has two components : the immediate perception of one's selfsameness and continuity in time, and the simultaneous perception of the fact that others recognize one's selfsameness and continuity — the psychosocial aspect.³ In a life of normal length, *ego* identity is constructed in a series of eight stages, each one marked off by a crisis, which is either successfully mastered, preparing the individual for further progress, or not mastered, leaving the individual's *ego* identity malformed to some extent. Erikson meshes the stages of psychosocial growth with the stages of psychosexual development, but the former carry on through two stages after the latter has been completed.⁴

Perhaps the most significant of Erikson's suggestions is his proposal about the eighth and ultimate stage of human development, a proposal in which he transcends both Freud and Hartmann and appro-

1. *Ibid.*, p.101.

2. ERIKSON, *Childhood and Society*, p.11, 1950, W. W. Norton Co., New York.

3. ERIKSON, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, *Psychological Monographs*, #1, p.23, International Universities Press, Inc., New York.

4. *Ibid.*, p.166.

ximates an Aristotelian and Thomistic notion of human maturity and perfection. If the eighth stage has been attained successfully, the individual is more than a sexually well-adjusted person, and more even than a well-adapted person. He has reached what Erikson terms 'integrity,' which is the quality of one who has attained 'wisdom.' For lack of a definition, Erikson describes this state as one of understanding of self and others, of peace with self and the world, of appreciation of the elements of human dignity and love, of sympathy and love which extends not to any limited group or class but to all mankind.¹ All this is highly reminiscent of the perfection which Aristotle discerned as man's happiness here on earth — contemplation ; which St. Thomas accepted and transmuted in the light of Christian revelation as the best happiness of the best men here on earth, and the essence, on a higher plane, of eternal joy. A Christian need feel no surprise if Erikson's final stage of man's life strikes a responsive chord among his own convictions.

The preceding paragraphs have attempted to indicate within the limits of a brief account, the new directions taken by contemporary psychoanalysis. The ways these modifications of Freud's theories render psychoanalysis more compatible with traditional modes of thought within the Church are obvious. The gain to be hoped for from this new compatibility is in the extent to which psychoanalysis' major insights into human nature will be incorporated into traditional Catholic doctrine. No serious statement of the degree or quality of change impressed on Freud's formulations is intended ; perhaps it will be sufficient to sum up the change in the words of David Rapoport. In his systematic statement of psychoanalytic theory, he cites the work of Hartmann and Erikson as "contributions which decisively shaped the present form of the theory."² How these contributions have decisively changed psychoanalysis is spelled out in detail in the course of his study. He asserts, echoing the most characteristic of psychoanalytic doctrines, that the crucial determinants of behaviors are unconscious and that all behavior is ultimately drive determined, but modifies these assertions with the statement :

While early psychoanalysis actually maintained, without reservation, the thesis of "ultimate drive determination," the increasing evidence for the "indivisibility of behavior" led to the realization that behavior, in so far as it can be said to be determined by drives, must also be said to be determined by defenses and/or controls. Moreover, with the development of ego psychology, the question was no longer which of these was

1. *Ibid.*, pp.98-99, 166.

2. RAPPOPORT, *The Structure of Psychoanalytic Theory: A Systematizing Attempt; Psychology: A Study of a Science*, Ed. Sigmund Koch, p.55, 1959, McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., New York.

the ultimate determiner of behavior but rather in what respect and to what extent was each the determiner of a given behavior.¹

Further on, he adds that all behavior is determined by reality, the adaptive point of view. This is Hartmann's contribution, a "radical development," in which reality, adaptedness and adaptation become "the matrix of all behavior."² Moreover, all behavior is socially determined, the psychosocial point of view, which is Erikson's conception paralleling and filling in Hartmann's formulations.³

In fine, the theoretical conception of human nature presented by contemporary psychoanalytic theorists is one with which Thomists can work very comfortably. This seems evident even from the somewhat cursory examination conducted in the preceding paragraphs. It has, moreover, certain further implications which tend to confirm the sense of compatibility. Only two of these will be mentioned, in order to keep this paper within reasonable bounds — the newer concepts of religion and morality. For Freud, "religion is comparable to a childhood neurosis" and he was "optimistic enough to assume that mankind will overcome this neurotic phase, just as so many children grow out of their similar neuroses."⁴ Hartmann moves somewhat away from this position, conceding to religion a broader psychological basis in the three mental institutions, and attributing to religion certain synthetic achievements by which the whole man, and not merely a repressed drive, is satisfied.⁵ Erikson is more frankly commendatory, seeing in religion one of the traditional means by which the sense of basic trust — an essential and primary component of a healthy personality — has been generated and secured.⁶

Similarly, the concept of morality has developed from Freud to Erikson. For Freud, the moral sense was a function of the *superego*, and its norms were for the most part unconsciously adopted and unconsciously exercised. If he did not entirely exclude rational or intelligent action from the operations of conscience and the moral sense, he did seem to devalue them more than was just. Hartmann speaks differently.

On the long way from the interiorization of parental demands after the oedipal conflicts to the more elaborate moral codes of the adult another factor becomes decisive. That is a process of generalization, of formalization, and of integration of moral values. It would be difficult to attribute

1. RAPPAPORT, *op. cit.*, pp.88-91.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.97, 100.

3. *Ibid.*, pp.101, 103.

4. FREUD, *The Future of an Illusion*, p.92, 1955, The Hogarth Press, Ltd., London.

5. HARTMANN, *Ego Psychology and the Problem of Adaptation*, pp.78-79.

6. ERIKSON, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, pp.64-65.

what I have in mind here to the *superego* itself. It rather corresponds to what we know of the functions of the *ego*.¹

Erikson seems to go even further in making many of the traditional moral virtues essential parts of the healthy personality.

In conclusion, then, we may be entitled to entertain a certain optimism about the development of psychological knowledge in the near future. If there are many insights and formulations in traditional Thomistic or Catholic psychology, which we would be loath to abandon, and if there are many insights in psychoanalysis which we would be eager to accept, it is heartening to find a sense of rapprochement developing between the two currents of thought which were once so hostile. It is by the cross-fertilization of ideas — the process out of which Thomism was born, and a process customary in Catholic thinking — that solid progress is made in the intellectual order.

Michael Stock, O. P.



1. HARTMANN, *Psychoanalysis and Moral Values*, p.31, 1960, International Universities Press, New York.