

THE
CRASHING
EGO

EDWARD SCHIFF

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By

Edward Schiff



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Foreword

Some authors of works like this are psychiatrists, psychologists, physicians or therapists. This author is none of the above.

This work is generally based on long personal observations, more than on statistical analysis, and in that sense not completely scientific. But psychology is perhaps the least straightforward of the sciences. (Some have even referred to it as more an art than a science.) This is because it deals with parameters difficult (as yet) to measure and express in terms of numbers. Other sciences do, so we can often express problems in those fields mathematically. Solving them mathematically often boils down to simple arithmetic. Not only are the solutions fairly easy, but we're not likely to get much controversy over the answers.

Psychology usually depends more on words than numbers, and we can certainly differ over their interpretation - the ideas they express. Freud's ideas, although influencing many, today are sometimes disputed. When a psychologist testifies for the prosecution in a trial, the defense often puts on the witness stand another psychologist with opposing views. So psychology is not a very precise science. Theories are difficult to prove or disprove, because of inadequate isolating of variables; mainstream ideas change with time; and people other than professionals can ponder the complexities of human personalities and relationships. And people in addition to professionals can judge the logic and credibility of this pondering.

Ego is instinctive, extremely influential in all of us, and ego drive may well be the most powerful force in our lives. This is why a nosediving ego can be SO devastating,

and creates a problem that has plagued mankind throughout history.

Defining and clarifying ego and its effects are necessary prerequisites to understanding ego-related disorders. One of these disorders is among the most puzzling, frustrating and difficult to treat.

Many of us know people whose behavior is sometimes very baffling and disturbing. These people react abnormally to anything they perceive as possibly affecting their egos, even in the slightest way. These reactions can be very hurtful to others and tend to drive people away. We may react with anger or disgust, in addition to bewilderment. Their actions seem a little irrational at times, although they are generally quite normal and rational. If we try to talk to them about this, they become agitated, defensive, or even lash out in anger. Sometimes they will burst into tears, or flee. Their problem is obviously deep-seated, not easily understood, and even difficult to diagnose. And so many of them live their entire lives with it, causing them much misery as well as considerable misery for anyone close to them.

Those who have studied this phenomenon, and use the overall terms "bipolar disorder" or "unipolar disorder", vary in their choice of treatments, but all seem to agree that at present there is no absolute cure. However, there has been considerable success in controlling symptoms.

Unfortunately, one terrible characteristic of this disorder is that it involves defenses that hurt others, and so in the long term only exacerbate problems. These same defenses tend to block attempts to communicate and treat the disorder. This ailment is tragically unique, in that the disorder itself works to inhibit any attempts to cure or even alleviate it.

It's strange that with all that has been written about bipolar disorder, the factor of ego seems rarely discussed, except to note the "low self - esteem" of those in deep depression or those who end in suicide, or the "inflated self-

esteem" when manic, or of those in cyclothymia (alternating episodes of highs and lows). However, the ego connection offers a reasonable and logical explanation for certain behavior and its causes.

Developing or learning about some logical reasons for ego-related behavior can be a great aid in understanding and dealing with these unfortunate people, and in calming our own apprehensions.

What we call bipolar disorder, the sixth leading cause of disability in the world, affects some 5.7 million Americans. Each person so afflicted has family, friends or coworkers who must learn to interact and cope successfully with him or her. This work is designed to help.

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I

Ego – What Is It?

I once watched a married couple go through a strange metamorphosis, all within a few minutes. The wife came home, and they greeted each other warmly. But after a brief exchange of words, his face was flushed with anger, and hers was streaked with tears. It started when she mentioned she had been slightly delayed by traffic. He insisted she had gone the “wrong” way, and detailed his “faster” route. She defended her chosen route, and attacked his. The argument grew and grew into a fierce shouting match. Do you think either one really cared much if one way was a few minutes faster than the other? Of course not. What was important was who was “right”, who would win, or more importantly, who was *not* going to lose. A young man once proclaimed, “I may not always be right, but I'm *never* wrong!” When two people argue, and neither one can stand the admission of being wrong, the issue will rarely be resolved. It was an *ego-based conflict*, what some may call “saving face”.

Almost any nice afternoon you can see young people on open fields playing soccer, baseball, football, or hockey. Their parents crowd the sidelines, cheering them on. These parents seem like a happy group, but as the game goes on it becomes apparent that some of them are too desperate to have their children perform well. When their offspring are in trouble, they vent their frustrations in angry outbursts, taunting opposing teams or players, cursing the coaches or referees or other parents. A few resort to violence with their

fists or feet or even baseball bats. (Resulting even in death.) Obviously ego-based, such behavior has ruined many a game.

On July 11, 1804, on a narrow ledge overlooking the Hudson River, two men stood back-to-back, pistols raised. They paced off, turned, and fired. One of the greats of American history, Alexander Hamilton, fell, mortally wounded at the age of 49. This famous duel was another ego-based conflict. Aaron Burr, reading Hamilton's words, wrote that they were “expressions derogatory to my honor.” Hamilton, when challenged to a duel by Burr, felt that protecting *his* honor made it impossible to refuse. Duels are always ego-based.

People have talked about their honor over many centuries. We still do it today, although some people prefer words like “esteem”, “integrity”, or “credibility”. People proclaim their honesty with “on my word of honor”. We address judges as “your honor”, implying superior judgment and power. We address some political leaders as “the honorable---” or “the right honorable---”. When heads of state search for ways to end a war, they talk about achieving “peace with honor” - maintaining the national ego – allowing the feeling of superiority without really having won the war. Honor is often mentioned in describing the behavior of Japanese soldiers in World War II, many of whom chose suicide rather than be captured. Many individuals have chosen suicide as the only way they feel they can sustain their honor, after some devastating blow to their egos. So honor is obviously tied to ego.

Honor is one of those words that serves as either a noun or verb. When we speak of someone's honor, we are referring to his self-respect, usually based on the perceived respect of others. When we honor someone, we are offering our respect.

Honor always refers to respect, and the respect is usually for superiority of some kind. In school, we put only

the superior students on the Honor Roll, or into the National Honor Society. In college, it's other "honorary" societies like Phi Beta Kappa. College students with superior grades graduate with "honors": magna cum laude ("with great honor") or summa cum laude ("with highest honor"). Our highest military medal is the Medal of Honor, awarded to those demonstrating the most superior bravery. Our Declaration of Independence ends with these words: "In support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and *our sacred honor*." Its location at the end emphasizes "sacred honor", giving it an importance above lives or fortunes. Honor was indeed a life-or-death matter, as proved by those who gave their lives in the Revolution, as well as Alexander Hamilton and all others who lost duels the hard way.

Now, fast forward to 1940, and World War II. France is surrendering, having been overwhelmed by the German war machine. General Keitel, one of the top German generals, makes a speech. He says, "To accept these conditions, the French delegation has been asked to come to the historic forest of Compiegne. This place has been chosen to blot out of our memory, once and for all, a remembrance which for France is not an *honorable* period of her history but which has been considered by the German people as the worst *dishonor* of all time." Hitler spoke passionately about German honor in his speeches leading up to the war. Remind us a little of Aaron Burr, don't they? Could it be that World War II was really just sort of a gigantic duel? That ego was at the heart of the bloodiest, most destructive conflict in human history?

We can find ego as a contributing factor in most violence. The history of "civilization" is largely a history of wars. As Eckhart Tolle writes, in World War I, millions of men died to gain a few miles of mud. And more than one hundred million people died violent deaths in the 20th cen-

ture, at the hands of fellow human beings. Terrible violence continues in this century, as we all know.

What does ego mean, anyway? Well, it comes from the Latin word for “I”. My dictionary gives as a first definition “the self”. That could cover almost anything that defines us as individuals. But it indicates the importance of individuality, and the need to express that individuality. There are some who think of ego variations as enhancing or degrading the self. We all develop a unique sense of “self” to define how we think of ourselves, and this forms a significant part of our self-value, but that is not the primary meaning of ego for most people today.

There are also some who only think of ego (or any word containing ego as a part) as related to selfishness, complete individual self-interest. But this too is not the essential meaning for most people today.

Probably the most famous user of the term was Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis. He defined it as one of three driving forces that shape our personalities and behavior, which he called id, ego and superego. A psychiatrist who came later, Eric Byrne, renamed them respectively child, adult and parent, which gives us a clue as to their meanings. Freud's “ego” was in the middle, the socially normal adult attitudes without the animal instincts of the child or the moralistic tendencies of the parent. One theory is that our behavior at any time depends on which of these is in control, as if we had a selector switch in our brains with three positions on it.

Most people today prefer these two definitions for ego: first, a sort of mental status concerning self-image or self-worth, and second, a related drive, one of those inner forces that make us act the way we do. So ego can have two related but different meanings. I prefer to separate these two meanings by calling them respectively *ego level* and *ego drive*. I define them this way: Ego level is *the value you place on yourself or your group at any particular moment*.

Ego Drive then becomes *the drive to maintain or improve ego level*.

There is no way today to measure ego levels. The best we can do is attempt to assign a relative value, by comparing individuals with each other. But this relativity shows the importance of comparisons with others. And it shows that ego is a completely social phenomenon; we develop ego levels and then adjust them as a result of interactions with others. Without others, and without interaction with others, we would have no egos, no one to whom we can feel superior or inferior.

I use the words “at any particular moment” because ego levels are quite variable. They act like stock market averages: holding level at times, or drifting slowly up or down, but sometimes zooming up or crashing down with surprising speed. Some people think our ego levels are a fixed part of our personalities, as if we set our ego levels once and keep them indefinitely. They say, “Joe has an inflated ego,” or “Sue suffers from low self-esteem”, as if these were permanent conditions. But Joe's “inflated ego” may be just a temporary front, and Sue can have her more confident moments. We're constantly judging ourselves, constantly adjusting our self-worth. When we're proud of something we've done, or someone praises us, our ego levels rise; when someone criticizes us or we make a mistake or do something considered wrong, our ego levels fall. Our proudful action increases our value in the minds of others. Our wrongful action causes a decrease in this value – a devaluing. We tend to increase or decrease our self-value accordingly.

Data of all kinds are constantly bombarding the computer that is our brain. One part of our brain asks these questions about each item:

1. Does this affect my ego level?
2. If so, does it push it up or down?
3. What is its weight in affecting my ego level?

It then enters the results into our ego level data banks. At any particular moment, our ego levels are the cumulative sum of many such pieces of data, all the pluses and minuses, up to that point in our lives. Those of heavier weight remain in effect over long periods of time. The lighter weight items tend to fade rather quickly, for most of us.

The heavy items from our childhood form our initial basic ego level as we mature. This is then boosted or dropped to other levels by major events affecting us. The light items are the day-to-day praises or criticisms, minor accomplishments or mistakes.

So our ego levels, at any point in time, are a combination of two elements: relatively fixed or long-term components and short-term variable components. We could call the fixed components a “carrier” because of its similarity to the radio process. In radio, the power for transmission comes from a steady wave called a carrier. Then the sound is converted into a fluctuating signal superimposed on this carrier. Our radio receiver first subtracts this carrier signal, leaving only the variable portion to be converted back into sound in the radio speaker. Similarly, the carrier ego level serves as a baseline, with the short-term components varying from it.

We can chart ego level versus time. The vertical axis represents ego level, and the horizontal axis, time. The carrier ego level by itself would be a series of roughly horizontal lines on this graph, indicating some ego levels holding relatively steady over certain periods of time, although some may gradually increase or decrease before the next abrupt change. We then superimpose the variable ego level components on this carrier line. They would show as jagged loops of various shapes and sizes, some starting and ending on the carrier line, and others building on each other to form a cumulative effect before returning to the carrier. Some would be positive; that is, above the carrier line, and others

negative, or below the carrier. The ego level at any time is a composite of carrier and variable components.

The carrier ego level components develop from major factors affecting our ego levels, that are heavily weighted and linger for long time periods. We initially form one up as we mature, and stabilize it in early adulthood. Then it moves and re-stabilizes at other levels as a result of major life events, producing a stepped graph. We start to form the initial carrier level from conditions of our birth, such as gender, birth order, racial or ethnic background, physical characteristics. Then we add all the heavy effects of our environment as we mature: the attention and support of parents, (or the lack thereof) our position relative to siblings, our family's economic status, degree of family stability, influence of parents, siblings, school, church, mentors, peers. Events that can cause later shifts in the carrier level include: close relationships, marriage, divorce, major illnesses, getting a college degree, getting or losing a prestigious job or promotion, buying a home, having children, successes or failures of spouses or children, children leaving the nest, retirement, death of a loved one.

So our ego level graph for most people looks like this: a curve that climbs to a level, then steadies, then moves through a series of jagged steps. The magnitude of the carrier steps can vary from person to person, as well as the shape and magnitudes of the short-term squiggles superimposed on the carrier. Short-term changes to ego levels usually only affect the variable portions, often just returning to the carrier line.

Why do we have egos, anyway? What is their purpose? In his fascinating book, "The Naked Ape", author Desmond Morris shows how we can trace the reasons for our appearance and much of our behavior back to our animal ancestors. We can get clues about this by studying the behavior even today of wild animals, especially primates. Here survival, and the drive for survival, influences much of their

activity. Selfishness is but one outgrowth of the survival drive. When a predator makes a kill, he drives away other animals, including those of his own species or family, at least until he has eaten his fill. A wild animal mother's protective and nurturing behavior toward its young may seem unselfish, but it ensures survival of the species. Some animals will look after or “babysit” youngsters of other parents while the parents are away. This seemingly unselfish behavior also helps survival of the species.

Failure to act selfishly means failure to survive, so only the selfish pass on this characteristic, and it becomes an instinct. Human selfishness derives from this, although we're sometimes clever enough to see that some short-term unselfish behavior can be beneficial (selfish) in the long run. And some are sufficiently strong of will to overcome their selfish instincts.

Egos are also an outgrowth of our survival instincts. For animals in the wild, “survival of the fittest” means just that. We could also call it “survival of the superior.” In competing for food or mates, only the most superior survive. Only the strongest, fastest, cleverest or most aggressive live to procreate and pass on these traits to their offspring. Animals, including the human animal, are made aware that being superior in certain ways is an advantage in life, a survival mechanism. It's part of the “natural selection” process.

If you watch two dogs fighting, you will sometimes see the dog being attacked lie down, roll over and assume a vulnerable position, paws in the air. When this happens, the other dog will usually immediately stop attacking. Why? If the fight is ego-based, that is, to establish superiority, the obvious surrender of one accomplishes that goal, and further fighting is no longer necessary. This same instinctive behavior exists in humans. Soldiers don't fire on an enemy who is surrendering. In a fight, we don't hit a man “when he's down.” We acknowledge superiority of someone by kneeling down, thus making ourselves vulnerable. From this

comes the custom of kneeling when we pray, and bowing or curtsying, even bowing our heads in prayer. Bowing is simply an acknowledgment of superiority.

We've all seen videos of male deer or other animals butting heads and fighting during the mating season. The winner gets the female or the harem of females, and sires the offspring. The females are aware that the winning male is the superior fighter. It's natural that the females recognize and admire those males with superior characteristics: superior size and muscles. These same characteristics mean the females will be protected from predators. Women are following an ancient instinct when they admire men who are tall or well-muscled. (What a hunk!)

Survival of the fittest means *survival of those who are superior*. So ego, like selfishness, is an instinct – inherent in all animals. But in some animals, and man in particular, it is also learned behavior, and even reasoned behavior. We all strive for superiority; this striving translates into the ego drive. Another great man from history, John Adams, wrote: “I believe there is one principle which predominates so much in every stage of life, from the cradle to the grave, in males and females, old and young, black and white, rich and poor, high and low, this passion for *superiority*.” Hens in a barnyard establish a “pecking order”, a ranking by superiority that determines who pecks whom. We also tend to establish values of the people we know, and to rank them by value. Our ego level could be called a subjective assessment of our place in the human “pecking order”.

It's important to note that superiority is relative. People in a group will not agree on the pecking order. Feelings of superiority or inferiority depend on our values, our attitude regarding those values, and our consequent perspective. Two people of different ages will use this age difference as a factor in establishing superiority and thus relative ego levels. But it's possible for both to feel superior. The older person can feel his more extensive knowledge and ex-

perience make him superior. But the younger person knows he's physically more capable, as well as simply having more years of life ahead of him.

It seems logical that egos are an outgrowth of our instinctive striving for superiority. But another viewpoint holds that we learn to value ourselves only as we're taught this as part of the maturing process. A baby doesn't completely know to place a value on himself until his parents value him, showing this with hugs and kisses and attention. It follows that the child who gets more of this will develop a higher initial ego level. This is the advantage of having a two-parent family, or a parent who doesn't work outside the home, or being an only child or the eldest child. Conversely, orphans or others who lack good parenting tend to have a lower initial ego level.

As a child grows, he also learns about self-value by observing his parents, siblings and friends. He establishes the pecking order among his siblings by his judgment of the relative valuing of his parents. (“Mom always liked you best!”)

Ego Level Criteria

What criteria do we use for setting our ego levels? How do we judge what defines “value” in our lives? And how do we weight those values to produce our ego levels?

We use cultural standards for weighting the inputs that push our ego levels up or down. We learn these standards as we mature, and then usually maintain them throughout our lives. They are a mixture of standards: ethnic, gender, family, religious, regional, economic. Although there is much commonality between them, certain extremes are also apparent. Most of us highly value someone completely unselfish, who devotes his or her life to helping others, the ultimate being laying down one's life to save another. But there are also those who feel their life is of greatest value when they sacrifice it to take the lives of others. (Suicide bombers)

So this mix of standards depends on their various weights in our particular environment and culture. Ethnic standards vary greatly. Many children spend more time watching TV than they spend in school, or talking with parents, or reading. So TV tends to heavily influence their ego level standards. In Asian cultures, parents, grandparents and all elderly are venerated. In our present TV culture, youth is glorified and the elderly are not respected. A child of Asian descent will set his ego level standards in this regard depending on his proportion of TV viewing to his exposure to (and acceptance of) his ethnic culture.

French people have told me that they can easily spot Americans. It's not because of differences in appearance. It's because we gaze directly into their eyes when conversing. They're shocked when Americans waiting in line strike up conversations with nearby strangers. They also feel that gazing into someone's eyes is too aggressive, too forward for anyone not in the family or a close friend. On the other hand, Americans are taken aback when French people, especially those of the same sex, greet each other by kissing on both cheeks.

Different cultures vary the customary or accepted distance between two people conversing. When an American encounters the custom, common in many other nationalities, of sitting closer to a conversation partner, he feels uncomfortable and moves back. We also maintain the custom of apologizing whenever we accidentally touch or bump a stranger. We're making sure everyone understands that we meant nothing sexual, even if all we did was bump an elbow. But it's also because we failed to maintain our accepted distance – that we intruded into their space.

When we're having a summer picnic in the park, we may see people from some Middle East cultures. The men are dressed in shorts and tank tops; the women are covered from head to foot. The men segregate themselves; the women and children form a separate group. These customs,

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so different from Western culture, form a strong part of the basis for their ego levels. Many of these women would feel degraded if forced to adopt Western customs. On the other hand, some women from the same background, who've accepted Western ideas, or who feel that women should have more freedom and independence, feel degraded if forced to maintain their original customs.

Family cultural standards are often the source of our standards of right and wrong. They're also the means of communicating many of our ethnic or religious standards.

Religious standards can be quite significant, depending on the strength of belief. Piety can be a great source of pride, as well as consolation.

Regional standards are apparent in the patriotic drive that accompanies any war or international conflict.

Our economic cultural environment exerts perhaps the strongest influence on our ego level-setting standards. Our capitalist, free-enterprise market-oriented system is based on the exploitation of our drive to be superior to others – to make the most money or achieve the most respected or controlling position. Greed can be defined as the insatiable quest for ego level gratification!

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