Gestalt Interpretation of Ego and Dependent Origination

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Abstract

Buddhist translators and teachers commonly use the term 'ego' to depict and elucidate Buddhist concepts. But when we examine how they use the term it is found to be poorly defined and of many divergent meanings. In the psychological sense, according to the standard Freudian interpretation, ego has a very clear, specific meaning, which is very different to the way people commonly understand. At the same time as Freud was popularizing his theories, another school of psychology called Gestalt also had an alternative ego theory. In this paper will be analyzed the meaning of 'ego' as Freud intended it, how it is commonly interpreted by non-psychologists, and how the Gestalt school understood it. Each definition will be compared to Buddhism to find the common and divergent points. Finally will be shown how the Gestalt interpretation fits with dependent origination.

Keywords: gestalt, ego, dependent origination, psychology

Introduction

Like many technical terms from psychology the word *ego* has filtered down into the common lexicon. Its meaning has changed from the original context to become almost the antithesis of what it meant in Freud's psychological model. These days it is not uncommon to hear about someone's ego being too large, or some self help guru teaching how to get rid of the ego. References to the ego in Western Buddhism reflect this inconsistency, varying greatly in meaning, and, most importantly, what one is to do with it. Freud's model of the ego on the other hand, was very clear, and specific in meaning. While psychology has different goals from Buddhism, since it has no concept of the 'unconditioned', enlightenment, it does have useful models that inform the Buddhist understanding of the world and how it is perceived.

The Gestalt Theory of Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka, had a radically different idea of the ego; one that is consistent with a gestalt interpretation of Dependent Origination, and the Buddhist idea of anattā (non-self).

When comparing and contrasting Buddhist and psychological models of the psyche we must bear in mind that each has different goals and methodologies. Are modern concepts from psychology are necessary for the meditator, or did the Buddha already give us enough tools to gain liberation? The Buddha himself claimed to have given a complete teaching, without hiding anything necessary in the 'Teacher's Fist'

> I have taught the dhamma, Ānanda, making no 'inner' and no 'outer': the Tathāgatha has no 'teacher's fist' in respect of doctrines (Walshe 1995: 245).

If the Buddha gave us all the tools necessary for liberation, of what benefit is it to introduce models from psychology? A large part of the problem is that translators use psychological terms and concepts when rendering Buddhist texts. Further, modern teachers use psychological terms and concepts when teaching and interpreting Buddhism and meditation techniques. This is most especially true of the term 'ego', which appears continually in translations of Buddhist texts. Thus it is germane to look at some of the meanings of 'ego'; in the original contexts of the Freudian and gestalt models before examining which Buddhist concepts are relevant to it.

Ego in Everyday Use

In every-day language, the most common understanding of ego seems to be a kind of self aggrandizement; an attempt to boost one's own image and standing in the eyes of others from a neurotic basis. The *Cambridge Dictionary online* gives preference to this common idea of ego, over the more specific original, before giving a more Freudian meaning:

- your idea or opinion of yourself, especially your feeling of your own importance and ability: *That man has such an enormous ego - I've never known anyone so full of themselves!*
- SPECIALIZED psychology: in psychoanalysis, the part of a person's mind that tries to match the hidden desires (= wishes) of the id (= part of the unconscious mind) with the demands of the real world.[1]

Merriam-Webster dictionary on the other hand begins with a more general idea of self:

- the self especially as contrasted with another self or the world.[2]

'The Self' and 'The I' are very different concepts – one would consider the digestive system to be part of the self, but it would rarely be considered 'I', as it mostly operates discrete from intentional 'ego' control. Dictionary.com entry reflects these very different ideas:

1. the "I" or self of any person; a person as thinking, feeling, and willing, and distinguishing itself from the selves of others and from objects of its thought.
2. Psychoanalysis: the part of the psychic apparatus that experiences and reacts to the outside world and thus mediates between the primitive drives of the id and the demands of the social and physical environment.
3. egotism; conceit; self-importance: *Her ego becomes more unbearable each day*.[3]

[1]Cambridge Dictionary, accessed 04/08/17, http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ego.
[2]Merriam-Webster, accessed 04/08/17, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ego.
[3]Dictionary.com, accessed 04/08/17, http://www.dictionary.com/browse/ego.

Modern Interpretations of 'Ego' in Buddhist Texts

These vague and rather disparate definitions of ego are reflected in Buddhist texts and translations, to the extent that the meanings of the original text are obscured. For instance, in *The Dictionary of Buddhism* by one of Thailand's most famous scholars under the entry for 'ego' we find the definition "attā, ātman" (Payutto 2002:369).

It is difficult to conceive of any way that the term *ātman* came to be equated with the idea of an 'ego'. The author of the dictionary is not a fluent English speaker, so one can only assume he was poorly advised for this term. When we switch to the Thai-English section of the same book, we find a broader selection of terms under *ātman* "1. Self; soul; ego; personal entity. 2. Mind; the whole personality" (Payutto 2002:359).

Such ideas as 'whole personality', 'ego', 'personal entity' and 'soul' seem very disparate. How they are all related to the idea of attā is not elaborated in the book. Usually the term attā (atman) refers to a concept of an eternal unchanging self, rather than the ever changing personality as suggested in the above definitions.

Here is an example from the introductory notes to the cornerstone Buddhist teaching on Dependent Origination, where *jāti* is equated with the ego (Sumedho 1991:10) rather than the more usual translation of rebirth:

> So there is freedom from desire (tanha-nirodha) and attention does not get stuck (upadana-nirodha) and grow into selfish motivations (bhava-nirodha) that center around and reinforce the ego (jati-nirodha)[44]

The following example is from a Chinese Zen manual on sudden enlightenment - a translation of the Zen master Baizhang Huahai who lived 720–814. The translator, John Blofeld, interprets the teachings of the Chinese master in psychological terms.

> Perceiving this [quiescent mind] we shall seem to others to have taken a sudden leap, as though from somewhere to nowhere. Indeed, 'sudden leap', though inaccurate, is perhaps the best term with which to describe the process ... What was formerly misperceived in the light of our little egos, we shall now rightly perceive in the glorious light of egolessness. (Blofeld:33).

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[4]This quote comes from the Introduction to the book by Ajahn Sucitto, rather than the author of the book.

This passage reflects a fairly common (mistaken) idea that humans have egos, that are bad, and that destroying the ego brings one to enlightenment (egolessness).

If Blofeld is referring to ego in a sense of 'self-aggrandizement' then it would make sense to destroy it - but the resultant state would scarcely be anything other than a humble, emotionally well-adjusted individual. If by 'ego' he means 'personality', then 'egolessness' would mean one no longer has a personality at all - which is not consistent with what we know of the Buddha's great disciples, who Dhammika (2006) shows all have individual personality traits. The idea that we have an ego, and it needs to be destroyed (or transcended) is not compatible with the, or with Freudian concept.

Later, as he gets to the direct translation of the original Zen text, Blofeld puts 'ego' into the mouth of Huihai himself, without any discussion of what the term might mean in this context:

> If you students of the Way had minds unstained, they would not give rise to falsehood and their attachment to the subjective ego and to objective externals would vanish.(Blofeld 2007:48)

These have been just a few examples of ego appearing in Buddhist texts, that are easy to find, and reflect the vague and ill-defined nature of the term. The first way to approach a clear definition is to examine the clear and precise function which it holds in Freudian psychology.

The Ego in Freudian Psychology

In Freudian psychology the ego does not appear as an independent term by itself, but as always as one aspect of a three part model of the human psyche. Each part of the model stands in relation to, and is largely defined by, the other two, and cannot really be separated from them without losing the whole context.

1. **ID** - the Id is the functional part of the psyche responsible for the discharge of energy tension, operating reflexively via the *pleasure principle*. In simple terms, a child or animal seeks to resolve internal or external stress in the easiest way possible - such as eating, excreting or crying of cold until it is provided with a warm blanket. (Hall:22-27). It closely corresponds to the Buddhist term *vedanā* (pleasant/unpleasant sensation).

2. **EGO** - this function usurps the energy of the Id, and redirects it to more useful ends, according to the reality principle. One of its key functions is to delay gratification

according to what it considers to be beneficial, rather than just following desires (Hall: 27-31). The reality principle would could correlate roughly with the Buddhist term *paññā* (wisdom).

3. **SUPEREGO** - this aspect represents the ideals and conscience rather than the real. It metes out both ideological reward and punishment (guilt) according to values generally considered to be learnt from the parents and society. (Hall 1954: 31-36)

The ego is the most conscious and self-aware part of the system, which in a properly functioning personality mediates between the other two parts:

> In the well-adjusted person the ego is the executive of the personality, controlling and governing the id and the superego and maintaining commerce with the external world in the interest of the total personality and its far-flung needs. When the ego is performing its executive functions wisely, harmony and adjustment prevail. Should the ego abdicate or surrender too much of its power to the id, to the superego, or to the external world, disharmony and maladjustments will ensue (Hall 1954: 28)

It is clear that in psychology the ego has a very specific function, and is in no way connected with the common understanding of the term. In this psychological sense, the ego cannot possibly be taken independently of the id and superego. In the development of personality, at birth only the id exists. Later, the ego develops in order to deal with reality, before the superego emerges as the socially conscious personality. The psychic energy of the id becomes distributed to the ego and superego (Liebert & Spiegler 1990: 95).Difficulties in this development lead to problems in the ego development, and resulting maladjustments of behavior. The structure of this development was later developed and extended by Freudian psychoanalyst Erik Erikson in his key work *Childhood and Society***,** where eight key stages of development are outlined (Erikson: 222-243).

Anxiety and Neurosis

Clearly the properly developed ego, governed as it is by the *reality principle*, is a good thing. So why is the ego interpreted as a bad thing in common language? The kind of bad behavior that we associate as 'egotistical' is in psychology indicative of a poorly functioning ego that has not developed appropriately. Psychoanalysis is understands this as stemming from unhealthy fixations developed early that give rise to neurotic anxiety in

later life. Freud noted three forms of anxiety (or fear), and played a key role in his overall approach (Hall 1954:61):

1. **Reality Anxiety**: painful emotional or physical experience resulting from danger in the real world. In these circumstances it is entirely to be expected for a normally functioning individual to experience anxiety, and respond appropriately. We might compare to the *Sabbāsavasutta* (M I 11), to the 'taints to be abandoned by avoiding' such as wild animals or dangerous situations.

2. Moral Anxiety: the feeling of suffering through committing wrong actions, such as killing or stealing. In Buddhism this is called *hiriottappa* (moral shame and dread), and is considered to be a 'noble treasure' (D III 165) along with five other qualities of *saddā* (faith), *sīla* (morality), *bāhusacca* (learning), *cāga* (liberality) and *paññā* (wisdom).

3. Neurotic Anxiety: the feeling of suffering in situations where there is no real or moral danger, but one still feels fear either consciously or unconsciously, and reacts with inappropriately. Maladjusted behavior, including what we might call 'egotistical', comes under the classification of 'neurotic' behavior in psychoanalysis.

When one is beset with anxiety, the normal reaction is to reduce the stress by any means in a defense hysteria most popularly understood as *defence mechanisms* as adopted by Anna Freud. She was clear that psychoanalysis was a therapeutic method concerned with the ego and its aberrations:

> From the beginning analysis, as a therapeutic method, was concerned with the ego and its aberrations: the investigation of the id and of its mode of operation was always only a means to an end. And the end was invariably the same: the correction of these abnormalities and the restoration of the ego to its integrity. (Freud 1968:1)

These three forms of anxiety make for an interesting commentary on the Buddhist idea of Dukkha, where reality anxiety is something that should be maintain, and moral anxiety something to develop so as to preserve good moral conduct. The ego in the Freudian sense is instrumental in this, as demonstrated by Mark Epstein, in a book tagged *Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective* where he point out that "meditation is not a means of forgetting the ego; it is a method of using ego to observe and tame its own manifestations" ... attempting to jettison the Freudian ego only undercuts the ego strength that is necessary for successful meditation practice" (Epstein 1996:93-94).

The Ego After Freud

Freud never stopped developing his ideas, constantly revising many of his cherished models; and psychoanalysts after him did the same. But the idea of the ego, in the model where it serves as the meditator between the id, superego, and the world, has remained a core structure of Freudian psychology.

Heinz Hartmann (1964) and others developed the role of the ego in to an extended 'ego-psychology' which looked not just at the *dysfunctional* ego mechanisms, but also at the *normal* adaptive personality; that is, the adaptive control the ego uses to respond to the environment motivated by mastery, competence and conscious determinism (Liebert & Spiegler 1990:96). Where Freud considered *motivation* to be the reduction and removal of anxiety causing tension, later psychologists felt the ego's motivation extended to competence drives which are resolved by stimulation, rather than removal.

Another ego-psychologist Heinz Kohut also noted that the ego takes a more positive role than simply moderating the needs of the Id as Freud had portrayed (Heinz 1971:119). Kohut maintained the original structure of the id/ego/superego model from psychoanalysis, but expanded it to include "the cohesive and structured total mind", giving an expanded role for the self motivated ego (Heinz 1971:214).

Definitions of Ego and Sutta Counterparts

So far ego has been looked at in four different ways:

1. Ego as self-aggrandizement, seeking to make oneself appear superior
2. Ego as a conscious sense of an 'I' which interacts with the environment
3. Ego as a narrative self-story
4. The well-developed ego that governs behavior based on the reality principle

1. Ego as self-aggrandizement, or self-importance: This is probably the most commonly heard use of the ego; when someone is described as having a big ego, or as being egotistical, it seems to point to a trait in that person where they seek to make themselves look big and look important. Often of course, we feel the opposite - that they are making themselves look foolish, or worse, egotistical!

There is one concept in Buddhist that equated directly to this personality trait, and that is *māna*, nearly always translated as *conceit*. In one stock format we find three ways of looking at self, which are listed by the commentary as *māna*.

> Whosoever hold views regarding any of the five khandha such as 'better am I', 'equal am I', or 'worse am I', what else are they but non-seers of what reality is? (S III 48, A III 356).

In this sense, clearly, self-aggrandizement is a quality to be abandoned. But equally one should abandon *any* form of judging and comparing, including judging yourself as lesser or equal to others. Being free from self-aggrandizement, would surely be a good form of character development, but it is neither enlightenment, nor resulting in anything other than a reasonably well formed personality.

2. Ego as a conscious sense of 'I' which interacts with the environment: although in psychology the ego cannot be considered independently of the id and superego, it nonetheless in common language is often interpreted as a conscious 'I' that interacts with immediate stimuli, based on personality traits, without any account taken of the id or superego. Following on from this, when scholars approach Buddhist texts, they often try to interpret the texts with the idea of an interactive conscious 'I' they call ego. For example, consider the following passage:

> One who is unskilled and undisciplined in their dhamma ... perceives earth as earth. Having perceived earth as earth he conceives [himself as] earth, he conceives [himself] in earth, he conceives he conceives [himself apart] from earth, he conceives earth to be 'mine,' he delights in earth. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it I say (M I 1).

Here the word 'conceives' (*mañña*ti), is glossed by the translator as "The cognitive distortion introduced by conceiving consists, in brief, in the intrusion of the egocentric perspective into the experience" (Bodhi 1995:1164). He continues in this endnote to comment "the intended object of conceiving is the misplaced sense of egoity**"** [sic].

Here Bhikkhu Bodhi uses the term ego twice in a single note explaining the quoted sutta above. He seems to explain that in Buddhism *any* kind of conceiving is a cognitive distortion of the ego. While this may be a sound interpretation of the sutta, it is a fairly unique and unjustified use of the term ego.

According to Buddhism, there is in fact a process where an "I am" identification arises. This idea is very similar to the interpretation of the ego and a conscious feeling of an "I" that guides behavior, even if this is not congruent with the ego in the Freudian sense.

> [regarding khandha as self] Thus this is the view: it has come to him (to think) "I am". Now when it has come to him "I am" there comes to pass a descent of the five feeling faculties of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. Mind [dhamma] is the result, mind-states [mano] are the result, the ignorance element is the result. Touched by the feeling born of contact with ignorance, there comes to the untaught many-folk (the thought) "I am" ... along with the fading away of ignorance and the arising of knowledge there comes to him no view that "I am" (S III 46).

In this passage, this conceit "I am" it, is to be abandoned. In that sense, one might talk about the 'removal' of the ego, or a state of 'egolessness' as a desirable state.

3. Ego as a narrative self: There is a common understanding of ego also as a set of identifications and stories. There has been much recent work in this field especially by Dan McAdams, studying how the stories we tell about ourselves, define ourselves. Examples might be identifying oneself as a scholar, an electrician or other trade. Or one sees oneself through certain values, often cultural, like being a hard worker, an American etc. (McAdams, Josselson & Lieblich, 2006: 3). This is echoed in the *Sabbāsavasutta*, which describes how one descends into a 'thicket of views':

> This is how he attends unwisely: 'Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?' Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the present thus: 'Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?' (M I 8).

The sutta continues to show a man pondering 'self exists for me', **'no self exists for me'**, 'I perceive self with self', 'I perceive self with not-self' and 'it is this self of mine that speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions; but this self of mine is permanent'. All of this is called the 'thicket of views'. These are views of the self are stipulated as unfit for attention.

4. Ego as the developed personality: As outlined earlier, according to Freud, a well-functioning person entails a well-developed ego. The ego operates according to the reality principle, as opposed to the id and its pleasure principle, and the superego with its ideals. If the ego functions well, according to Freud, it is firmly grounded in the reality principle, and able to delay gratification of desires according to what it deems healthy for the individual.

This reality principle, or rationality principle, bears close resemblance to the Pali term *paññā* (wisdom), and as such it certainly should be something to be cherished and developed. (D III 220) A being who operates with wisdom, we can count on as being self-controlled, or self-possessed. The wisdom faculty controls the desires of the id.

> Monks, if on self-examination a monk finds: I generally live covetous, malevolent in heart, possessed by sloth-and-torpor, excited in mind, doubtful and wavering, wrathful with soiled thoughts, with body passionate, sluggish and uncontrolled - then that monk must put forth extra desire, effort, endeavour ... for the abandoning of those wicked unprofitable states. (A V 93).

The result of the primacy of the reality principle over the pleasure seeking (*vedanā*) id, is a balanced and non-neurotic personality. The best Buddhist equivalent of this would be development of the ten *pāramitā*, which are qualities, the perfection of which, make for a Buddha: Generosity, virtue, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, honesty, resolution, loving-kindness, and equanimity (Payutto 2009: 239).

Development of these qualities would require a conscious effort to develop, but once internalized they are largely unconscious - insofar as they affect current behavior without necessarily being called continually to mind. In this way the *pāramitā* accord well with Freud's idea of a well-functioning ego. Such an ego will have become internalized during childhood, and comprises both conscious and unconscious elements, which affect current behaviour. Thus taking the ego in the psychological sense, as outlined by Freud, we find that it is something to be developed, by the primacy of the reality principle. This correlates closely with the Buddhist idea of abandoning unwholesome qualities, elevating wisdom, and developing wholesome personality traits.

Gestalt Analysis of Ego

The original gestalt theorists comprise three main figures: Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Köhler, and while their gestalt school was dominant in Germany during the 1920s, by the time of the Nazi political takeover they, being Jewish, were each forced to flee Germany (Pind 2004:146). Their initial work was experimentation on how human beings perceive 'objects'; for example how flashing lights in sequence gives the impression of a single light moving (Wertheimer 2012: 2). Köhler described this primary feature of experience as "naive experience consists first of all of objects, their properties and changes, which appear to exist and to happen quite independently of us" (Köhler 1947:

5). Objects that manifest, are called a 'figure' that appear on a 'ground' (Pind 2004:97-100), and can be anything - the sky, a book, a sound of a car etc..

When a figure appears, it comes complete along with both physical and mental aspects, organized according to certain laws (Wertheimer 1923: 71-102). The key feature of the gestalt approach is that experience is not constructed from mere sensory data like a machine, but presented in discreet 'wholes' or *gestalten*. Such wholes include grouped actions, such as nodding or shaking the head (Kőhler 1947:153). Kőhler devotes an entire chapter to refuting this atomist approach which he called *Machine Theory* (Köhler 1947:100-135). He maintains the gestalt position that wholes are not constructed by parts. Instead, an experience arises as a complete unit - a unit that informs the parts, rather than the parts informing the whole. One of his statements laying out this approach, is in fact, a good definition for what gestalt perception is about.

> Our view will be that, instead of reacting to local stimuli by local and mutually independent events, the organism responds to the *pattern* of stimuli to which it is exposed; and that this answer is a unitary process, a functional whole, which gives, in experience, a sensory scene rather than a mosaic of local sensations (Köhler 1947:103).

Gestalts are not limited to one sense or other, but group entire actions and objects along with perceptions; for instance a beam of wood, when perceived, arises complete with the knowing what it can be used for, that it bears weight (Wertheimer 1923:558) or the sound of thunder is grouped together with a fearful reaction and expectation of rain (Koffka 1936:72). This aspect of grouping both mental perceptions, intentions and physical forms is reflected exactly in the Buddhist concept of *nāmarūpa*:

> 'nāmarūpa conditions contact.' By whatever properties, features, signs or indications the name factor is conceived of, would there, in the absence of such properties ... pertaining to the mind factor be manifest any grasping at the idea of the body-factor? 'No Lord.'By whatever properties the mind-factor and the body-factor are designated – in their absence is there manifested any grasping at the idea, or at sensory reaction?' 'No Lord.'By whatever properties, features, signs or indications the mind-factor is conceived of, in the absence of these is there any contact to be found? 'No Lord.'
>
> Thus Ānanda, just this, namely nāmarūpa, is the root, the cause, the origin, the condition for all contact. (D II 59)

Here the Buddha states clearly that both the physical and mental factors necessarily arise together in a whole. Key to this process is the aiming, or turning of the mind towards an object (intentionality):

> Turning the mind towards the object is the chief characteristic of manasikāra. It is like the rudder of the ship, which is indispensible to take her directly to her destination. Mind without manasikāra is like a rudderless ship.
>
> Manasikāra is also compared to a charioteer that sits with close attention on two well trained horses, (mind and object) as regards their rhythmical movements (Narada 1979:89).

Thus the whole process of dependent origination seems to depend upon seeing an object (Cittasaṃvaro, 2019:118-126). There are many forms of dependent origination, but that found in the *Mulāhatthipadopamasutta* is clear for the present purpose. Here, after a descriptive treatment of the nature of the four great elements, the Buddha continues:

> Just as when a space is enclosed by timber and creepers, grass and clay, it comes to be termed 'house,' so too, when a space is enclosed by bones and sinews, flesh and skin, it comes to be termed 'material form.' (M I 191)

This passage shows how a 'house' is gathered together from the parts that comprise it, just as by analogy, the sutta says, there is the "gathering, and amassing of things into the five aggregates". Immediately following the description of how a 'house' arises from the organisation of the parts, the Buddha outlines how such things arise dependently on three factors of a sense, sense object, and attention. Together with this form and consciousness, the sutta continues, arises *saṅkhāra*, *vedanā* and *saññā*. These are "included," "gathered" and "amassed".

If the sense, sense object and attention do not combine, the sutta continues, then there is no arising of that class of consciousness, showing how the khandhas come to be gathered together in the moment with phenomenologically perceived objects. This the sutta continues, is how the five khandhas are dependently arising.

This phenomenological understanding is vital to the idea of consciousness (viññāṇa) in Buddhism. Consciousness is not something that lasts a lifetime, or even the waking hours, but is something that arises and ceases continually with the present sensory contact. This is clear in the mahātaṇhāsankhaya sutta, where the Buddha describes the idea that it is the same consciousness that runs through this and other lifetimes, as a pernicious view:

> Bhikkhus, consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent on which it arises. When consciousness arises dependent on the eye and forms, it is reckoned as eye-consciousness ...Just as a fire is reckoned by the particular condition upon which it burns - when fire burns dependent on logs, it is reckoned as a log fire (M I 260).

The same formula is given for faggot fire, grass, dung, chaff, and rubbish. The consciousness arises dependent on a particular sense. With that as nutriment, it comes to be, and with the removal of that nutriment, it ceases to be. If you do not get this point, says the Buddha, you are 'misguided'!

> Misguided man, in many discourses have I not stated consciousness to be dependently arises, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness (M I 258).

Thus consciousness arises and ceases continually, sparking the process of PS in the present moment, dependent on each gestalt object grouping. These cause the identification of self. The Buddha describes how it would be easy to see the body as self, as it lasts for a number of years and then dies; but it is difficult to see consciousness as not-self, even though it arises and ceases continually just like a monkey swings from branch to bough in the forest.

> But this, brethren, that we call thought, that we call mind, that we call consciousness, that arises as one think, ceases as another, whether by night or by day. Just as a monkey, brethren, faring through the woods, through the great forest, catches hold of a bough, letting it go, seizes another (S II 95).

The sutta continues to say that one thing arises, and then another, all dependently. It proceeds to give the standard 12 part formula of PS. It finishes with being repelled by the five *khandha*, and being set free.

Ego as a Gestalten

Gestalt theory developed quickly after the first experiments into how figures are perceived, and how the ground influences them. Objects, whether they form the figure or not, are still processed and arranged according to gestalt principles. For example, one might

go across a drawing room to take ones seat, and navigate numerous tables and chairs along the way. The room has a certain 'rightness', or 'orderliness' that is not the same as a lumber yard where things are thrown and thus organised according to purely mechanical forces. The drawing room conforms to a gestalt organization, that might not be the particular figure that is perceived (Koffka: 1936:16). Even though such objects as the tables and chairs are not necessarily individually perceived as a figure (object) on a ground (room), they are still treated as objects according to behaviour; this Koffka (1936:28ff) called 'behavioural field' objects. Such objects follow laws of organisation according to how they are organised into gestalts, rather than how them might be in the material world. For example, if one perceives a rope as a snake, the behavioural gestalt will be one of avoidance. Koffka gives the example of a person riding across a frozen lake, thinking it to be a field - behaviour is governed by the behavioural-field object, and not the material object (Koffka 1936:28). Koffka continues "the environment is always an environment of something, so my behavioural environment is the environment of me and my behaviour" (Koffka 1936:39). Only when one knows ones own self and behaviour in the environment, Koffka continues, is there "direct experience, or what is called consciousness".

Thus the ego, in gestalt theory, is just another behavioural field object, like tables and chairs, or the sound of an airplane passing above. Wertheimer (1923: 6) puts it this way:

> Our next point is that my field comprises also my Ego. There is not from the beginning an Ego over-against others, but the genesis of an Ego offers one of the most fascinating problems, the solution of which seems to lie in Gestalt principles. However, once constituted, the Ego is a functional part of the total field.

Thus the ego is not something that one 'has' or 'is', which interacts with the world as it is in Freudian theory, but is just a behavioural field object like any other object, albeit a rather common one. Like any gestalt, it can be broken down into parts, and reconstituted in different ways. A clear example is that of a chariot - it exists as a gestalt, a behavioural field object, with which one interacts (going for a ride, or avoiding if it is heading ones way). It arises in experience complete with the physical form, the perceptions, pleasant/unpleasant sensation, attention and other mental factors - a complete *nāmarūpa*. One can perceptually break it down however, and group it with other vehicles as 'transport', by possession (mine, his), by it's component parts (wheels, base) etc.. We see this example many times in Buddhism, for instance where Vajirā is tempted by Māra (S I 135), in order to distract her from concentration. Māra asks her:

By whom has this being been created?
Where is the maker of the being?
Where has the being arisen?
Where does the being cease?

Vajirā is not deluded by Māra, and replies how this whole (self) is a mere assembly of parts:

'Being' Why dost thou harp upon that word?
Among false opinions Māra, hast you strayed
Mere bundle of conditioned factors this!
No 'being' can be here discerned to be

For just as, when the parts are rightly set
the word 'chariot' ariseth [in our minds],
So, doth our usage covenant to say:
'Being' when the aggregates are there.

Clearly Vajirā is understanding the self, the ego, as just another gestalt whole, that can be easily broken down. As such the self is not actually existing, it is just another behavioural field object like the chariot. The methodology of Buddhism however, is in opposition to that of gestalt - Buddhism seeks to break down perceptions to arrive at a kind of emptiness; whereas gestalt is interested in what laws govern how objects are organised and brought into perceptive awareness.

The End of Gestalt Objects

Koffka spends a lot of pages examining how this ego works as a behavioural field object (Koffka 1923:319-367) but for the present purpose it is enough to understand ego as a gestalt, or constructed thing. The ego may be organised into conscious awareness, as the attention can be turned towards anything in the sensory field. But usually it sits in the 'ground' part of any experience. As it is just a behavioural field object, it is necessarily impermanent and non-abiding. As such it must be dukkha. And as it has no intrinsic form, and can be arbitrarily constructed and deconstructed according to the forces of organisation at any moment, it is non-self. Where attention lands on an object, there is a growth of activity (*saṇkhāra*) and the whole chain of dependent origination follows.

> Where there is passion, delight, & craving for the nutriment of physical food, consciousness lands there and increases. Where consciousness lands and increases, there is the alighting of name-&-form. Where there is the alighting of name-&-form, there is the growth of fabrications [saṇkhāra] (S III 101).

If there is no 'alighting of *nāmarūpa'*, then there is no consciousness formed with that object. Buddhism points to a state where no objects are formed as 'figure on ground' as the goal of the holy life. Again, enlightenment is for one who is not "trammelled" by *nāmarūpa*, and thereby does not enter into any kind of "possession":

> Let one put hate away, abandon conceit
> Passing beyond all fetters as well
> That one - by name and form untrammeledd
> And possessionless - no pains befall (Dhp 221)

> When consciousness is well understood,
> Name-and-shape is well understood.
> When name-and-shape is well understood,
> I declare there is nothing further
> that the Ariyan disciple has to do (S II 100)

Conclusion

The term 'ego' is confused by many varying definitions. While in Freud it has a clear function and symbiosis with the id and the superego, in colloquial language it carries a lot of other meanings. They all seem to understand ego as something that exists, a self that interacts with the world. Buddhist writers and translators should be aware of the context in which ego is used in psychology, as it regularly creeps into Buddhist teachings. The Buddha of course, did not ever posit an ego in the Freudian sense, and so writers should be careful about using the term. The gestalt school of psychology on the other hand, has a clear definition of ego, that makes it a behavioural field object, like any other object, that arises dependent on various factors of field organization. It can be broken down and reformulated arbitrarily, and thus has no real abiding self-nature. Yet at the same time, it can be an object with which, and around which one acts.

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