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**On the Roots of Absolutism**

by Karl Figlio

***The problem***

I want to characterize a particular feature of – typically violent – extremism. I call it absolutism: not as a manner of speaking, but as a strictly absolute state of mind from which absolute violence – violence to eliminate an other – follows. In 2006, I published a paper on ‘The Absolute State of Mind in Society and the Individual’. Briefly, I concluded that such state of mind embraced the features that many authors had identified in various forms of fundamentalism: righteousness, single-mindedness, unwavering persistence, simplification, religious sense of cosmic mission, sense of certainty, dread of internal impurity and tendency towards action, including violence. I suggested that this state of mind was ‘characterized by a psychotic idealization and its consequences: massive projective identification and a dread, not just of impurity, but of desolation…’ Furthermore,

Projective identification fosters such a mental state of inner certainty by appropriating the good qualities of the other and expelling the subject’s or subject-group’s bad qualities into the other. The body-based power of projective identification endows this process with a force akin to a physical force. The mental state of conviction stands in for empirical reality. [Hence,] uncertainty, doubt, reflectiveness, compromise, toleration – understanding itself – are experienced as pollution…External reality can tap the energy of this psychotic process, acting as a vehicle for it. The apparent rationality, say of political or religious absolutism, now suffused with passion, makes it more difficult to understand and stand against. We are not talking about psychotic individuals, but of a common psychotic core, which group formations can accentuate. (p.137)

I think this characterization remains persuasive but does not sufficiently specify the source of the idea of ‘absolute’. An absolute state of mind aims not only to triumph, but dwells in certainty. It is not a better or stronger view, one in which one judges oneself better than another – even much better. It exists in the negation of an other, whether individual or society. It aims not only to destroy the other as a competitor but to exist as an equivalent of the absence of the other: an ego as the absence of an object.

I will ground this argument in the divergence between Freud and Klein on primal object relations. One could expand the field. For example, Winnicott postulates a continuity of being in the true self, which is protected as the source of the experience of pure being by the false self that engages with the world. It is an isolate, a reserve of authenticity and liveliness in its remaining – in an ideal limit – beyond impingement by the external world. At the edge between true and false self lies – in the best case – an experience of being itself that infuses object relations but is not based on them (Winnicott 1960; for a guide through this complex area, see Abram 1996). But I will restrict my conceptual analysis to the comparison of Klein with Freud. I want to highlight the idea that the ego/self (I won’t distinguish them for our purposes) exists as the negation of the other. Developmentally, this process is the emergence of the ego/self from nothing, and from which the life of the ego continues as a process of existing next to an intimation of nothing. Although I won’t be including Winnicott further in this analysis, I refer the reader to his clinical accounts of the self as nothing, simultaneously ‘true’, if totally unimpinged upon, and struggling against nothing (Winnicott 1959). I argue that this standing next to the absent other, an other projected into a group taken unconsciously to *be* this other, is the defining feature of absolutism.

***Can There be no object for the ego?***

For Freud, the ego is an entity that emerges from contact with external reality into object relations. For Klein, the ego is an agent from the start, shaping the object relations with which it is engaged from the start. For Freud, there is an objectless state before object relations. For Klein, there are bad objects or objects that are somewhere else, but there are always objects. For Freud, the ego forms in primary narcissism, across a nascent boundary between objectlessness and object-relating. For Klein, there is no primary narcissism, only a defensive, secondary narcissism.

These two, seemingly incompatible, positions rest on two different models of the psyche: Freudian theory is based on instinct and pleasure-seeking. The psyche evolves from its biological base, with drives at the boundary; ‘no object’ precedes ‘good’ and ‘bad’ objects, and objectlessness remains as a possible primal collapse. In Kleinian theory, psychic life is object-relational from the ‘outset’. The contrast might better be put as: for Klein, the ego is an agent from the outset of psychic life; for Freud, there is no outset of psychic life; the ego is always emerging and becoming. Freud’s thinking stands out from Klein’s with the idea of an ego in the absence of an object, an ego in the threshold of nothing, not just an ego managing its object-world. Such an ego is a template for an absolute state of mind, in which ego = no object.

A state of a beginning in the absence of an object – a nothing – is inconceivable. Language has no place for it. We can say, ‘I see nothing’, but it leaves an uneasy feeling that ‘nothing’ is a grammatical object but that is not the same sort of object as, say, ‘bird’. If there never were birds, we just wouldn’t have a word, bird. But if there were no object, would there be an ‘I’ to say so? Maybe a creator exists only in creating objects that affirm the creator. What about, ‘I began to speak.’ Hannah Arendt (1958, pp. 175 – 184) calls speaking a ‘natal’ moment – an utterance from nowhere; a birth. This natality is also a birth of the ‘I’ that utters. When ‘I’ speak, ‘I’ perform being a subject, knowing ‘I am’ because I am affirmed by an awareness of having spoken: but about what ‘am I thinking’? Could ‘I’ be ‘myself’ as an object in the moment of my being a subject.

Here is a conundrum of consciousness. There is no awareness apart from registering being aware; that is, being an object to oneself, being self-consciousness: the ego as simultaneously subject and object to itself. But maybe, in an ephemeral moment, ‘I’ stand out from nowhere in a fleeting intimation of emptiness just before the object confirms my subjecthood, or as a condition of it. Typically, the idea of an ‘I’ in an objectless world is attributed to Descartes, with his *Cogito* *ergo sum*: ‘I think, therefore I am.’ Has Descartes contradicted himself? ‘I think, therefore I am’ begs the question: ‘I’ does not exist *because* it thinks but is *presumed* in the thinking.

But suppose Descartes’ ‘therefore’ is not a causal or logical statement, but an instantaneous awareness of being as indubitable (I draw upon Newman 2014): an immediate, present experience of existing in a conscious, awake subject. Such moments in the form of ‘clear and distinct ideas’ are primary data, moments of intuition and inference that confirm a self as a ‘cognitive illumination’ in which I am secure in my continuing existence and the grounding of my knowledge. Through such moments, ‘I’ can resist ‘hyperbolic’ or ‘methodic’ doubt, which would challenge any assumption of undeceived, continuing being over time; now ‘I am’ in the form of undeceived memory and knowledge, grounded in clear and distinct ideas (see especially pp. 13 – 16).

Grasping this paradoxical situation of self-awareness was the work of the philosopher, Johann Gottlieb Fichte (I am drawing on Henrich 1982.) Fichte argued that there must be a subject to apprehend an object and it is itself the object of recognition. It is a moment of self-recognition as an instantaneous inference in which the subject apprehends itself in self-consciousness. One must postulate such an immediate self-knowledge as an inference and a concept of being a self; otherwise, one would be caught in an infinite regress in the need to postulate a prior subject to recognize an object that would already be present to recognize the subject as a subject that recognized the object.

In this logic, the subject exists for itself in the moment of recognizing itself. But the instantaneous inference of being a self through being an object nonetheless implies a ‘before’, albeit ephemeral: In coming into awareness, the ego notices it is being recognized. In a hint of primary narcissism,

‘[t]he Self posits itself absolutely, that is, without any mediation.’…Self-consciousness is an intimate unity arising from an inconceivable ground which the Self does not control. At the same time, the Self makes itself manifest to itself. It possesses itself *as* Self, and must acquire additional knowledge of itself in the course of performing its characteristic activity. (Henrich 1982, pp. 25, 42; author’s emphasis)

‘Rationally’, the observer must have been there before the ego, even though the ego created it. But coming from nowhere, or being next to nothing or emptiness offers only a rational, retrospective explanation to the established ego. The ego is more an awareness of a continuation in the moment of self-apprehension: a continuity that begins as virtual and persists into becoming a subject with an object. This historical essence of the ‘I’ constitutes what the philosopher, R. G. Collingwood (1946/1993), calls the ‘historical imagination’: history lived in the past as present in today’s mind. To have a mind is to have a historical imagination: an idea of continuity, not as a perception but as a sense of process. In *this* sense, it is right to say that to be conscious as a declaration of existing occurs in an awareness of process and that process is thinking.

The historical imagination [has] as its special task to imagine the past: not an object of possible perception, since it does not now exist, but able through this activity to become an object of our thought…The criterion [of historical truth] is the idea of history itself: the idea of an imaginary picture of the past…It is not a chance product of psychological causes; it is…part of the furniture of his mind, [which one] discovers himself to possess in so far as he becomes conscious of what it is to have a mind. (pp. 242, 248)

In historical continuity, the ‘now’ of this moment of awareness has arisen from ‘before’. But ‘before’ is, in a primal sense, an uncanny presence inside ‘now’, which is then stretched out over time and informed by evidence. Historical thinking is an idea of past events as constructions in the present, whether in society or the individual. It is not an unrestrained belief that we share the same thoughts and feelings as they – or we – did in the past; it is disciplined inference embedded in a mind that is historical in its essence. Historical imagination is the immediate experience of coming from and into: of consciousness as process and continuity as a mode of apprehension. It can be inferred into the events of the past of historical figures, of one’s own historical past and one’s sense of a just-before without duration.

This line of thinking is akin to Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, which underlie much of this theory of the psyche. Events occur outside experience to an ego not able to assimilate them. They remain as an uncanny presence without registration in consciousness until they are lifted, modified, into the later psyche, both conscious and unconscious. In my view, this earlier, unexperienced, unassimilable, uncanny presence is, at its root, nothing – empty.

***The Nascent Historical Ego***

We can approach the uncanny past-in-the-present through the idea of a primal language-in-action, which extends, as a template, into articulate language. Here is an observation of an infant between six months and one year.

She was comfortable in the presence of others in addition to her mother and father. If a small number of familiar people stood in a group, any one of them holding her, the baby would look intently at one for some time, then at another, and another, catching each with her concentrating eyes until she had moved around the whole group. She would then continue to move her gaze unhurriedly from one to the other, often in the same order.

Her eyes, along with her head, seemed simultaneously to be motor and sensory organs. To continue the inference, her movements created links between objects in the baby’s mind. In so doing, they created internal objects that, like the people around her, also observed the baby; or that her internal linkings created her linked external objects. It is a single moment of self-awareness in the creation of internal objects that merge with external objects by projection and introjection between the nascent ego and the external world. An internal social world of self-awareness arises in the same moment as the external world.

In this language-in-action, one might say, from the angle of defence rather than development, that the nascent ego notices itself in a disturbance by what – to observers – is an external object. The ego hovers between relaxing into unawareness, or noticing itself in an internal unease, or locating the unease in an object present to its sense organs. This internal tension is apprehended by the infant, who is clearly disturbed by perceptions, but who becomes the agent of her/his disturbance by her/his own simultaneous movements and looking (as in the vignette above). The nascent self in such a moment *is* in the body in movement, in a language-in-action. This process was brought home to me by an observation of a baby of less than two weeks.

His mother sat him on her lap facing away from her. I could see his face clearly, but they could not see each other's faces. He held his left thumb effortlessly in his mouth and gummed it vigorously but not greedily. His fingers were extended towards his right eye. His mother, saying he mustn’t get his fingers in his eyes, brushed gently over his forehead. It wasn't clear whether she actually pushed his hand away and his thumb out of his mouth, but that was the effect. His left hand now moved to the same place on his face, as if repeating, with his hand, the movement she had just made. She wiped his lips with a cloth. His left hand went to the right side of his face, fingers extended and palm outwards, as if warding off a blow. He settled and yawned. She yawned and said he was making her sleepy.

There are two forms of perception here: 1) narcissistic, in suffering disturbances that are repudiated by imitatively becoming them; 2) perceptual, in introjecting – eating – his thumb as his mother, forming a jointly external and internal object. His imitative and introjective performances led to a peaceful re-settling in both baby and mother. They showed him at the origin of a capacity to perceive himself as an object, as if from mother’s viewpoint. His awareness of mother and of himself developed together.

My observation corresponds to the two forms of perception described by Eugenio Gaddini (1969): the one, a ‘psychosensory’, narcissistic resettling; the other, a ‘psycho-oral’ incorporation. The acknowledgment of an object in its own right would be equivalent to a separation of that object from the sphere of self-creation. In the beginning, mother is the baby's creation – an aspect of the self. Her appearance as distinctly other corresponds to her emergence within his self, a process linked to the objective perceptual world as an other arising from mother.

In the observation, an imitative performance leads to a peaceful re-settling in both baby and mother; that is, he re-settles himself (as does his mother) by his imitation, which predominated over his perceiving his mother or his thumb as an object. In Freudian terms, the infant resettles from a disturbance back into auto-erotism, while also noticing an impingement. It is simultaneously a defence against impingement and a developmental step in creating object relations. I am pushing Freud’s idea to the limit – I think with justification – in saying that the ego forms in disturbances: in a holding of what is agreeable and projecting what is disagreeable (creating them as such). This early combination of narcissistic re-settlement and primal object relations is a language-in-action. The process is repeated at higher levels as the ego consolidates itself. For example, the baby is drawn erotically to the breast, from which it also retreats into itself in thumb-sucking. Later, the baby will feed itself from a spoon and also feed its mother. For Freud, the originary primal havering occurs in a unique moment. The nascent ego is drawn to the *mother, not just to her alluring breast*. The consolidation of *mother* as an object of the *ego* rather than the breast as an object of instinct, is a birth. But it comes next to absolute loss – more primal than weaning. Freud describes this rift as follows.

At a time at which the first beginnings of sexual satisfaction are still linked with the taking of nourishment, the sexual instinct has a sexual object outside the infant's own body in the shape of his mother's breast. It is only later that the instinct *loses that object*, just at the time, perhaps, when the child is able to form a *total idea of the person* to whom the organ that is giving him satisfaction belongs. As a rule the sexual instinct then becomes auto-erotic, and not until the period of latency has been passed through is the original relation restored. There are thus good reasons why a child sucking at his mother's breast has become the prototype of every relation of love. The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it (1905, p. 222; my emphasis)

Note the rift between ego and object occurs at the moment at which object-relating occurs. The re-found object of the ego is utterly different from the earlier object of instinct, albeit uncannily rooted in it. The object in itself then has to be rediscovered in line with the ego’s capacity to tolerate it as an object and not part of the ego. Mother’s face appears in the moment that an object of the nutritive instinct is replaced by an object of the sexual instinct. There is a gap, a nothing and a leap to recognizing an object in its own right: mother replaces the inclusion of a part-object – the breast – inside the pleasure ego. The cognitive abys is accompanied by an affect of depression.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I want to draw attention to a difference in cognitive increment and affective experience that divides the psychoanalytic field at the deep level of paradigms. In the Kleinian/object relations paradigm, the ego is the agent that forms itself and its objects, partly as a reflection in the eyes of its objects. For Klein, the template of traumatic loss is weaning. In the Freudian paradigm, the ego is historical in coming into being and in revising the past as past-in-the-present. The shock of loss dwells in the present, as the shadow of the uncanny sensory experience of being here before, described by Freud. This past-in-the-present regresses to an intimation of a beginning. The experience of loss lies earlier than for Klein, in the discovery of mother, which replaces the breast as the object of instinct, and even earlier in the first transition from objectlessness to the creation of an object by projection of unpleasure as a not-ego. In doing so, such a moment engraves loss in the psyche of the infant as it comes into itself in (self)consciousness. The breast does not become ‘bad’, nor part of mother rather than part of the infant’s mouth, but not there.

For Freud, the past is not just a series of events into the present, but of a gap in the formation of the primal ego. Klein’s axiom of object-relating from the outset diffuses the abruptness inherent in Freud’s axiom that the ego emerges and develops. One might better say that the ego erupts: that there is a nothing at the beginning and at moments of step-wise increment of ego, when it stands next to nothing. The moment of difference from the surroundings is accompanied by an anguish of non-existence.

The oedipal scenario carries this inconceivable beginning into a conceivable, higher level, as a representation of the paradox of self-creation. Freud speaks of a dimension of the Oedipus complex as a self-fathering. In this dimension of the Oedipus complex, the boy replaces father with himself, not just to have mother as a sexual object, but to father himself with her. In effect, he also mothers himself by compensating her with himself for her bearing him (Freud 1910, p. 173). One version carries this theme of self-creation explicitly. In this formulation, the generations are reversed, so that the child becomes parent to his parents (Jones 1913); more fundamentally, one can discern a drive to get to the beginning, specifically the beginning of oneself (Figlio 2003). I think the psychoanalytic field divides around the unfulfillable impulsion to get to the beginning of ourselves in the form of the first experience of being a separate self through loss.[[2]](#footnote-2)

To nail down the abruptness of loss in the Freudian paradigm, we should distinguish absence or nothing from loss, and it is the former to which I refer. Maybe an absence can only be represented by an abstract system of representation, something like non-linear and multi-dimensional geometry, quantum mechanics or relativity. For Bion, geometry is a system developed to represent emotion evoked by absence.

I shall now use the geometrical concepts of lines, points, and space (as derived originally not from a realization of three-dimensional space but from the realizations of the emotional mental life) as returnable to the realm from which they appear to me to spring. That is, if the geometer's concept of space derives from an experience of ‘the place where something was’ it is to be returned to illuminate the domain where it is in my experience meaningful to say that ‘a feeling of depression’ is ‘the place where a breast or other lost object was’ and that ‘space’ is ‘where depression, or some other emotion, used to be’. (Bion, 1970, p. 10)

Bion suggests that geometry springs from the need to find an object in a place that is now empty. Geometry combines mathematical knowledge with a pictured world, and thereby demonstrates the expected connection between mathematical and physical reality. The geometrical contemplation of physical space simultaneously provides a vehicle for an emotional reaction to loss. That reaction can run the gamut from remaining contemplative, knowing that geometrical knowledge will not restore the lost object; to believing that the object has been magically possessed; to destroying the object, with the aim of eliminating the disturbance caused by its unavailability; to representing, as in a dot or a line in a graph, seeing what is dimensionless and therefore not there even if it is in mind.

Indeed, the (geometrical) impulse aims to transcend the experience of loss altogether by setting out a framework in which one can hunt for a lost object. In that sense, an object is never simply lost, but is potentially in a terrain where one has the idea of searching for it. The system of geometry is itself an object of contemplation and inside this system one can make statements about the world that can be checked. It transforms the non-existent object or an empty space or a nothing, which is inconceivable, into an object that was there, but has moved somewhere else. While one might think that the sentence, ‘the breast is lost at weaning’, speaks of the lost breast as an object, the visual absence of an object in geometrical space comes closer to emptiness. A point in geometry has no dimension. It cannot, therefore, be an object, yet is mappable within coordinates as something – that is not there. An internal object might be likened to a point: locatable albeit non-existent to the transcendent ego.

***Absolutism Stands Against Nothing: a Model and Its Consequences***

I have drawn out a contradiction between two models of the psyche. The Freudian model assumes a primal, objectless matrix in which the ego is born and grows. It can be not-yet present to experience, which, therefore, does not yet exist for it. The object relations model – in which there is an ego ‘from the outset’ – is an agent that defends itself against anxiety in its relationships with external and internal objects. I have been highlighting the Freudian model against the Kleinian model because it grounds a fundamental feature of absolutism. For Freud, the primal ego is without an object and the first object is itself. From this standpoint, primary narcissism is an achievement in which the ego comes into being for itself and in itself, in a tension with being replaced by an external object. (Freud 1914; 1923). There is, therefore, a rift in the psyche from the moment one can speak of there being a psyche. It remains in a schism in the individual and, through group dynamics, in the relationship between cultures.[[3]](#footnote-3) The moment of difference from surroundings is accompanied by an anguish of non-existence, which is projected to form an other according to the equation ego = not other.

In this rift, the nascent ego *is* and is in the process of holding what is agreeable and ridding itself of its disagreeable part in projective identification with an object (a precursor of which can be found in Freud 1915, p. 136). It is not yet an agent but is emerging in recognizing itself in a moment of instinctual satisfaction in itself as a ‘pleasure ego’ in the presence of an other. Freud says that the first object-relating aim of the ego – the first sexual aim – is incorporating or devouring, ‘a type of love which is consistent with abolishing the object’s separate existence’ (1915, 38 – 9). The ‘abolishing’ of an object, in the *Standard Edition*, isn’t wrong, but it doesn’t capture the ambiguity of Freud’s ‘*aufheben*’: to suspend, paradoxically holding the object in being while simultaneously removing it: not attacking the object, as in later stages, but eliding or rescinding it. It suggests holding in abeyance for a later time, as in a later development of the ego.[[4]](#footnote-4)

No observation can distinguish directly between these two models, but we can derive consequences that can be observed. The model provides hypothetical mechanisms to explain the observations, and both model and observation can become more precise in the process. I have argued that one consequence of Freud’s model is that it accounts for an ‘absolute state of mind’: in my view, such a model is essential to grounding such a state of mind. In consciousness, the ego fears annihilation and aims to annihilate the object that threatens it. But in the unconscious, the absolute lies in an *equation* between the existence of the object as the absence of the ego or the existence of the ego as the absence of the object.

I offer two, brief examples of an absolute state of mind. I suggest that they are consequences of the Freudian model, which grounds it. By keeping this link, we can select aspects of the observations for refining our observations and aspects of the model for refining the relevant theory. I will first present the phenomena, then come back to a closer comparison between Freudian and Kleinian/object relations theory, in order to highlight the difference. The first is a clinical observation; the second, a historical interpretation.

In the observation,

a patient reported a dream, in which he was watching a little boy playing in a fenced children’s playground in a park. As he watched the child play, he realized that the child was himself as a child. Since he was both the child and the man who was watching, there could be only one penis. To whom did it belong? Father and son were reduced to the single penis that joined them: a narcissistic emblem that was the marker of both their sameness and their difference.

Father and son are separated by the difference between the generations, but in this case the difference is annulled by a primal identity in which there is narcissistic self, concentrated in the penis as a self-replica. Later, the penis-father would signify an attack on the ego as the core of castration anxiety. At root, either father or son can exist, but not both simultaneously (I reported this and similar observations in 2000, pp.127 – 130).[[5]](#footnote-5)

The second example is Christian antisemitism, as embodied in Nazi ideology. I have argued elsewhere that Nazi antisemitism is different from other racisms. The attack on the Jews as a people is not based on differences from a denigrated ‘other’ who might bring disease or other dangers into the blood of the nation, but on the dread of sameness. Beneath observed differences between Aryan and Jew, the Jew is an alternative ideal ego/ego-ideal. The ego-ideal is absolute because it is derived from primary narcissism. Primary narcissism is absolute both in its insularity and in its being on the edge of object relating. In that moment, the object is set over against the insularity of primary narcissism, threatening its dissolution. Absolutism is bolstered at this edge of experience of an outside world, as a defence against the imposition of the object world. That edge moment is what Freud and Gaddini (above) described.

One of the signals that Nazi ideology lay in the realm of the illusory absolute of the ideal ego/ego ideal was an idea formulated by the historian of Nazi Germany, Ian Kershaw. Nazi policy evolved in what he called ‘working to the Führer’ (Kershaw 1999). It was always in the future, always a promise of a transcendent totality of the Volk. The Nazi dream did not exist, but would, from a psychoanalytic angle, come to be in an unconscious equation with there being no Jews, a situation that also did not exist. The Reich on the threshold of existence was also the threshold of eliminating the Jews.

This situation is different from racisms based on a degraded object. Typically, degraded objects can be dealt with by an established ego as one of range of unnecessary or dangerous objects. They are ‘realistic’, even if mistakenly or maliciously treated. But to the extent that they fuse with the ego-ideal of the perpetrator and to the extent that the perpetrator ego is also confused with its own ego-ideal, as an ideal ego, reality has been replaced by delusion. The animosity and the aim to exterminate an other rises in proportion to similarity, culminating in a narcissistic equation (an extension of Freud’s narcissism of small differences; 1930, p.114). Extrapolating this relationship, I conclude that the unique identity of primary narcissism in the form of an ideal ego identical to the ego-ideal is equal to the non-existence of the other as an equivalent ideal ego/ego-ideal. The consequence is an absolute. Jews epitomized these confusions in the Nazi mind. The perceived differences that drove Nazi antisemitism were delusions, in which the existence of the anti-Semite perpetrator was *equated* with the non-existence of the Jew. At the core, it is the non-existence of an alternative ideal-ego/ego-ideal.

I have argued this case extensively in Figlio 2012 and especially in 2017. Here I want to include a further piece of evidence. There has been a long-standing discussion of the role of the church in Nazi ideology, often arguing that the Nazi’s took little interest in religion. Recent research has put this position into question. Sections of the Protestant church, not only fostered anti-Semitism, but also the eliminatory form of Nazi anti-Semitism (Heschel 2008; Steigmann-Gall 2003). National Socialist ideology and policy assimilated the established religious base, to the extent that Steigmann-Gall (2004) speaks of it as ‘religious politics’. One example of this convergence between Christian and Nazi anti-Semitism was the work of the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life. Its aim with respect to the Bible and religious belief was akin to the aim of the Nazi’s with respect to the German Volk. In 1936, before the Nuremberg Laws and the exportation and murder of the Jews, Siegfried Leffler, later a figurehead of the Institute, said to a meeting of theologians

As a Christian, I can, I must, and I ought always to have or to find a bridge to the Jew in my heart. But as a Christian, I also have to follow the laws of my nation [Volk], which are often presented in a very cruel way, so that again I am brought to the harshest of conflicts with the Jew. Even if I know ‘thou shalt not kill’ is a commandment of God or ‘thou shalt love the Jew’ because he too is a child of the eternal father, I am able to know as well that I have to kill him, I have to shoot him, and I can only do that if I am permitted to say: Christ. (quoted in Heschel, p. 10)

***The Brutal Delusion of an Absolute***

The two examples above follow from an unconscious position of an absolute. I do not think they can be derived from an object relations model. As a monotheistic religion, Christianity contains an ego-ideal and the yearning to become like it; that is, a phantasy of an ideal ego. Such a structure cannot tolerate another equivalent structure. The narcissism of small differences leads to an unconscious, narcissistic equation.[[6]](#footnote-6) Without having this unconscious equation in mind in the individual case, the one-penis phenomenon would seem to be castration anxiety or an attack on the bad breast; and in society, Christian anti-Semitism would, as another form of racism, follow from a similar attack on a bad object. We now need, once again, to go back to a comparison between Freud and Klein to differentiate between persecuting an other to avoid awful persecution by a bad object, from condemning the other to nothing to avoid emptiness by delusionally creating an enemy to be made nothing.

I want to turn to Klein’s own account of her difference from Freud, to consolidate my argument for the special place of primary narcissism as the foundation of object relations. Klein argues that Freud’s formulations ‘come close to what [she] described as the first introjected objects, for by definition identifications are the result of introjection’ (1952, p. 52). She notes that Freud says that ‘the first and most important identifications [lie] in the “pre-history of every person” [and] that they are direct and immediate [, taking] place earlier than any object cathexis [, which implies] that introjection even precedes object relations’ (1952, p. 52 and n. 1). She seems here to concede a coming into being of the ego, but her view is not the same as Freud’s. Freud’s ‘direct and immediate’ identifications build up the superego, ahead of the ego. It is, therefore, a moment in which the ego forms in self-consciousness through the observing superego.[[7]](#footnote-7)

For Freud, Klein argues, ‘impulses, phantasies, anxieties and defences either are not present in [the infant], or are not related to an object, [but] would operate *in vacuo*’. Her clinical experience contradicts these implications of a pre-objectal situation.

The analysis of very young children has taught me that there is no instinctual urge, no anxiety situation, no mental process which does not involve objects, external or internal; in other words, object-relations are at the *centre* of emotional life. Furthermore, love and hatred, phantasies, anxieties, and defences are also operative from the beginning and are *ab initio* indivisibly linked with object-relations. (Klein 1952, p. 53; Klein’s emphasis)[[8]](#footnote-8)

In my view, they would not operate in vacuo, but would build up a primal ego world of language-in-action.

Freud and Klein also differ on the origin of the ego-ideal. For Freud, it is pre-objectal, a primary identification, heir to primary narcissism, an illusion with an allure of plenitude and absolutism (Freud 1923, pp., 31, 48)[[9]](#footnote-9); for Klein, it is an an excessive projection of the good self (Klein 1946, pp. 9, 13). But her good self is not primary narcissism: it is good in its distance from the bad object, which, by projective identification, is the bad part of the self. Here is an example reported by Betty Joseph from near the end of a Friday session with a four-year-old girl.

'Bastard! Take off your clothes and jump outside ... Stop your talking, take off your clothes. You are cold. I'm not cold' ... Here the words carry the concrete meaning, to the child, of the separation of the weekend – the awful coldness. This she tries to force into the analyst and it is felt to have been concretely achieved. 'You are cold, I am not cold.' (Joseph, 1984, p. 68)

This formulation touches on narcissism, but it is not the primary narcissism lodged in the ego-ideal. It lacks the absolute quality of the Freudian ideal ego, which exists in the absence of an object and in its paradoxical identicality with the ego-ideal as the instantaneous discernment of the ideal ego as perfect. The girl is abandoned, miserable and angry, but her survival is not at stake.

Klein does, however, give us a lead to understanding how the object relations model could be squared with the Freudian model, and I think it loops back to our earlier discussion of a language-in-action. She says that all psychic life is object related, ‘except for the libido attached to the infant’s own body’ (1952, p. 172). Here is auto-erotism. In Klein’s interpretation, Freud thought it was the successor to object relations, not an objectless precursor, and Freud did say that thumb sucking defended against object loss. His main point, however, was that re-finding mother was finding her in her own right, experienced by the infant as a loss in the transition from auto-erotism to object relating. This loss was a primal loss – before weaning; an absolute loss in the breaching of the intactness of narcissistic completeness. It was beginning after nothing, with an uncanny intimation of coming from somewhere. In this instant, there was no phantasy of a bad mother.

***Conclusion***

Here is the ground of absolutism. In my argument, psychoanalytic theories are models, constructs in which observable phenomena jibe with parameters in the theory. In my examples, extreme forms of exclusion suggest reconsidering them as an absolute state of mind, defined in terms of what I have called a ‘narcissistic equation’. We can look for an absolute in observable instances of a particular form of victimization as a driving core. An absolute is supported by a theory in which self and other cannot co-exist, a theory of an object world built on a primal absence in a gap between primary narcissism and object relations, with its intimation of a primal loss.

This interface between an objectless ego and a nascent ego in object relations makes sense when based on Freud’s theory that the first identification is immediate and direct, and forms the primal ego-ideal or superego, not the ego. It is equivalent to saying that the ego comes into being in a moment of self-awareness, in the presence of this primal ego-ideal/superego. This interface can be discerned in Gaddini’s distinction between psychosensory perception, which re-settles a disturbed narcissism, and a co-existing psycho-oral perception, which creates the first object relations through early introjections. Finally, the objectless autoerotism – the precursor of primary narcissism – is neither objectless nor object related, but a bodily language-in-action that will be assimilated into a nascent ego, which refines language into verbalizations and articulate speech. Together they characterize the nascent ego, which is born from primary narcissism: an ego not yet born, but nonetheless nascent and standing against ‘nothing’.

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1. Later, Freud distinguished experience arising outside the ego from experience inside the ego, the former consolidating the idea of an object with respect to the ‘reality ego’, the latter a state of the ‘pleasure ego’.

   The antithesis between subjective and objective does not exist from the first. It only comes into being from the fact that thinking possesses the capacity to bring before the mind once more something that has once been perceived, by reproducing it as a presentation without the external object having still to be there. The first and immediate aim, therefore, of reality-testing is, not to *find* an object in real perception which corresponds to the one presented, but to *refind* such an object, to convince oneself that it is still there (1925, pp. 237 – 238) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Building on Freud’s concept of primary identification – an instantaneous identification before object relations, in which self and object are not distinguished – Winnicott eloquently combines the Freudian and object relational paradigms. He speaks of a ‘not-yet’, in which the ego is not yet able to experience an event, whether in its maturity or in response to impingement (Freud 1923, p. 31; Winnicott 1956). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One might claim that it is not valid to move from theory and observations derived from the individual to group and social phenomena. I cannot argue the case in this paper, but I have done so in Figlio 2017, pp. 45 – 72 and Figlio 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It also refers to the retraction of a law. No longer valid, a law still refers to an object, but it is now an empty designation. It comprises perfectly comprehensible statements (as does ‘I see nothing’) but they no longer refer to anything. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. While Freud accepted the claims of colleagues, that castration anxiety could be triggered by different losses, such as separation from mother, the loss of the breast or loss of faeces in the anal stage, he thought that the threat of loss of the penis was different from them and was the proper source of castration anxiety. He based the special status of the loss of the penis on its narcissistic quality. It was, in effect a little man, inside the narcissistic envelope of its host, yet apart from it; in effect both an object one could lose and the subject himself (Freud 1909, p. 8 n. 2; Figlio 2000, pp. 149 – 152). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jacoby has shown this phenomenon in brutal, eliminatory schisms within the Christian church (Jacoby 2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For Freud

   the ego is formed to a great extent out of identifications which take the place of abandoned cathexes by the id; …the first of these identifications always behave as a special agency in the ego and stand apart from the ego in the form of a superego…The superego owes its special position in the ego, or in relation to the ego, to a factor which must be considered from two sides: on the one hand, it was the first identification and one which took place while the ego was still feeble, and on the other hand it is heir to the Oedipus complex… (1923, p. 48) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Yet Klein is ambiguous on the idea of object relations from birth.

   The primal processes of projection and introjection, being inextricably linked with the infant’s emotions and anxieties, *initiate* object-relations: by projecting, *i. e.,* deflecting libido and aggression on to the mother’s breast, the basis for object-relations is established: by introjecting the object, first of all the breast, relations to internal objects come into being. (1952, p. 49; my emphasis)

   She seems in imply that, while there is an object from birth, it only becomes an object of the psyche by a process that deposits anxieties and emotions and simultaneously introjects this psychic object into the internal world. There seems to be room for the idea that ego and (psychic) object develop together, and that is what she means by there being ego ‘from the outset’ as opposed to her occasional use of ‘from the beginning of post-natal life’, but there is no intimation of a ‘nothing’ next to – before – the ego. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I cannot go into Freud’s use of ego-ideal as distinct from superego. When he speaks of the ego-ideal, he usually derives it from primary narcissism; when he speaks of the superego, he normally derives it from the Oedipus complex. But with respect to a primary identification, he speaks of both: in note 7 above, he refers to the superego; below, of the ego-ideal.

   [T]he effects of the first identifications … will be general and lasting. This leads us back to the origin of the ego ideal; for behind it there lies hidden an individual’s first and most important identification…This is apparently not in the first instance the consequence or outcome of an object-cathexis; it is a direct and immediate identification and takes place earlier than any object-cathexis (1923, p. 31) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)