

Philosophy

Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious

Nidesh Lawtoo

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Picture yourself in the early twentieth century, fully alive and engaged with the modernist movement's flowering in the arts, literature, and psychology. Here's the catch: imagine that the Father of Modernism, Sigmund Freud, didn't exist. How would our ideas of the unconscious mind, the modern psyche, look without Freud's psychoanalytical infant/Oedipal/repressed configurations?

Mind blowing, actually.

In *The Phantom of the Ego*, Nidesh Lawtoo wants us to call into question everything we think we know about the human ego: how it developed, what purpose it serves, how is it influenced, etc. He points to newborns showing imitative reflexes—a self-other connectedness—at thirty minutes of age, and reminds us that Freud had many contemporaries working on competing ideas of the human psyche. Nietzsche, especially, took a wildly different path; what he called the ego's "phantom." Lawtoo explains Nietzsche's premise: "this phantom is born out of an unconscious process of psychic 'communication' that spreads contagiously from self to others, one head to another head, depriving 'the great majority' of their own thoughts, values, and opinions and, thus, turning their ego into what he calls, once again, a 'phantom of the ego.'"

In addition to Nietzsche, Lawtoo pens chapters on other Modernist explorers, including Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, and Georges Bataille.

Lawtoo's purpose is not to knock Freud from his lofty place—but, obviously, human consciousness, the supposed pinnacle of the evolutionary process, as well as Eastern ideas of duality, may have some more 'splaining to do.

Matt Sutherland