

THE PROBLEM OF DEFENCE AND THE NEUROTIC INTERPRETATION OF REALITY¹

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Experience already gained in analytic work with psychotics during early stages of psycho-analysis, notably through the influence of the Zürich school, had led Freud to pay greater attention than previously to early ego-development and to formulate his concept of primary narcissism. Further analytic investigation of psychotic states, and the more and more frequent observations of certain character disorders, have made it obvious that the deficiencies and deformations in the organization of ego-structure, over and above the neurotic defence systems and mechanisms, are of prime importance for the understanding of such disorders. Freud's distinction between narcissistic and transference neuroses is a sign of this recognition.

Nevertheless, it has been the predominant tendency in psycho-analytic thinking to keep the phenomena of conflict and of defence mechanisms in the forefront of clinical investigation, to make them the basis of theoretical constructions concerning the psychic apparatus and its dynamics and economics, and to understand developmental processes as such in terms of defence. Interest was centred on the structure and functions of neurotic symptom formation and other phenomena in the series of psychological manifestations of anxiety, conflict, and the defensive reactions against them.

The central importance of conflict, anxiety, and defence for any concrete understanding of normal and pathological psychological processes is based on very specific constellations in the growth period of human beings. The infant and child, equipped at birth only with certain automatic mechanisms for maintaining himself in equilibrium with the environment, increasingly becomes confronted with external conditions of an extremely complex nature. These complex external conditions, external from the point of view of the observer, are not merely sets

of 'biological' events, but events of different orders of integration which we call psychological, cultural, social. These events and processes are of a degree of integration and differentiation utterly incongruous with and superior to the level of integrative functioning of the infant and child. Thus, special efforts have to be made by the environment, and over a prolonged period of time, to create approximately appropriate psychological conditions for his development. The fact of human civilization, in its broadest sense, and its state of complexity, renders it such a problem, how the human being can become an integral part of it, that is, integrated into its texture and participating in its further evolution. Neurotic and psychotic developments are the expression of a failure of the human being to achieve or maintain this integration on the level of integrative behaviour which we call psychological.

It is the discrepancy between the state of integration of 'external reality' into which the infant is born, and his integrative mechanisms and capacity at birth and for a long time to come, which brings about multiple occasions for deviation, deficiency of organization, arrest of development, pathogenic defences. The environment in our culture is first represented by the parents, the family, who thus are in the position of having to create and maintain conditions for psychological survival and development.

The parental, and in the early stages especially the maternal, supply of satisfaction of needs and of support and channelling of maturation processes, constitute a regressive movement on the part of the parents which minimizes the objective discrepancy and allows the infant to remain in integrative interaction with the environment. Active support and channelling consist in creating a regressive, primitively structured environment with which the child is able to inte-

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grate; and this, ideally, should continue in a sliding balance between the maturing biopsychological structures, functions, and needs, and parental support.² In actuality, however, the opportunities, and conditions of practical necessity, for an imbalance in this relationship, especially in our culture, are legion. Too little or too much, too early or too late support and channelling, and the varieties of conflict between the two parents in their capacity as supporting agents to the child, represent a multitude of possibilities for such imbalance. With the increasing complexity of a culture other agents, in addition to parents, gain in importance, and the period of maturation lengthens.

For a discussion of the specific constellations obtaining in the growth period of human beings, and of their crucial importance in the causation of neurosis, I refer to Freud's description of the situation in the last chapter of *The Problem of Anxiety*. He distinguishes three factors in the causation of neurosis: the one just mentioned of the prolonged dependency; the factor, which he calls phylogenetic, of the diphase psychosexual development; and, third, the 'psychological' factor. This latter is connected with the differentiation of the psychic apparatus into ego and id, and consists in the fact that by virtue of the dangers of external reality certain instinctual impulses become dangers. The ego cannot flee from the id, but has to defend itself against the instinctual danger by restricting its own organization and by symptom formation.³

Discrepancy, then, between the individual's needs and the support of the environment, discrepancy between maturation level and environmental channelling of maturation processes, constitute basic threats. To the extent to which the growing individual develops under the sway of such discrepancy, anxiety and the possibilities for conflict situations arise. I wish to emphasize that the discrepancies referred to cannot be assumed to be due to specifically hostile forces of the environment impinging on the individual.

Such hostile forces may exist too. But what is meant here is the difference between the integrative level of the individual and the integrative level of the environment. To the extent to which this difference is being bridged by the regressive supportive channelling of the environment, development can proceed without this threat, as the progressive integration of reality on the part of the child is undisturbed by this factor.

Defence, in the sense in which we speak of it when dealing with neurotic mechanisms, is based on the development of the ego as a specialized structure within the psychic apparatus, and, correspondingly, on the formation of and interaction with libidinal objects. A certain degree of ego-structuralization and of object-structuralization has to have occurred to make defence processes and operations possible. Ego-structuralization and object formation occur to the extent to which synthetic-integrative processes can proceed relatively undisturbed by the above-formulated discrepancy. This, under ordinary circumstances, takes place to a degree sufficient for the gradual formation of an ego and of a reality of some cohesive organization.

It is only on the basis of the work accomplished by early integrative processes, such as projection, introjection, identification, through which an ego and objects come into being, that defence processes become possible, and that neurosis becomes possible. In psychosis, and to certain degrees in character disorders, defences are not available or break down because of the weakness and deficiencies of the ego-structure and the lack of reality-organization.

Defence is intimately related to *regression*. But regression is not one of the defence mechanisms. In the defence process, representing a failure in integration and an attempt at re-integration on a regressive level, the ego falls back on older methods as it were, on more primitive processes of integration which serve as substitutes. They serve to establish and maintain a restricted level of 'adjustment' to a piece, an aspect, of reality

² A view consonant with the theoretical formulations attempted here is developed for instance by Margaret E. Fries, 'The Child's Ego Development and the Training of Adults in his Environment' (*The Psycho-analytic Study of the Child*, Vol. 2, 1946).

³ S. Freud: *The Problem of Anxiety*. New York, 1936, pp. 99-101.

⁴ Ives Hendrick, notably in his paper 'Early Development of the Ego: Identification in Infancy' (*Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 1951, Vol. 20), expresses a similar view. He states: '...the pathology of psychoses, and also that of many character problems, was primarily the result of defects in functions usually

considered components of the ego. These personalities differ in their essential dynamics from what is characteristic of the psychoneuroses. The symptoms are not primarily the result of a healthy ego's defence against an unresolved infantile conflict; they result from a fundamental inadequacy of some essential function of the ego itself. These studies suggested, therefore, that such defective functions are end results of failures in ego development, failures, however, at much more immature stages of ego development than those already extensively appraised by analysis.' Hendrick speaks in this connection of grouping 'such personality problems together as different varieties of ego defect neuroses'. (*Op. cit.*, p. 44).

that cannot be integrated adequately. Defence mechanisms, seen from this angle, are regressive attempts to come to terms with experiences which cannot be integrated on the level of development reached by the ego in other areas of its integration with reality. They may, in certain instances, however, at the same time serve the function of furthering the progress of integration in other areas.

The Oedipus complex, the 'core of neurosis', is the prototype of such a defensive struggle which takes place, in one form or another, in every human being in our type of culture; a struggle which ends in a temporary defeat and, for a time, in the kind of restricted adjustment of which I spoke. The Oedipus complex is the outstanding example also of a defence process where the regression helps to further development in other areas.

Since by the time the Oedipus conflict has fully developed, the ego has gained considerable strength, since in fact oedipal development can take place in full realization only under circumstances which permit sufficient solidification of the ego and a differentiated configuration of mutually related libidinal objects, defence structures typical for neurosis can largely be understood in terms of oedipal and post-oedipal development. For the understanding of psychotic and related phenomena we have to have recourse to pre-oedipal phases where neither ego nor reality are as yet sufficiently organized and differentiated from one another to make defence processes possible.

To reformulate: Defence, in the sense in which we speak of it in neurosis, and therefore to a certain degree in normal development,⁵ is based on that stage in the development of individual-environment configuration, of ego-reality integration, in which an organized ego and organized reality have been differentiated from each other. What I mean here by organized reality may be indicated by saying that it implies (among other things) the establishment of distinct, libidinally invested (parental) figures mutually related to each other and the ego, such as they come into being in the development of the Oedipus situation. Only then is a stage in the constitution of ego and of reality reached in which a defence struggle between an ego and an 'external'

object-world and the resulting defence against id impulses can occur. Psychotic and related processes are located in pre-oedipal levels of development where the relatedness to the environment is of a more primitive cast than the relationship of an individual, structured into id, ego, and superego, with an external world. On pre-oedipal levels the integrative processes are still those introjective, projective, and identificatory interactions of a narcissistic and magical nature which lead to the above-mentioned definitive structures. In the analysis of psychotic states, and of many character disorders, it is these early, pre-defensive processes of integration, of relatedness to the environment, which represent the main subject and the main problem of our therapeutic endeavour.

The regressive element in the defence process lies in the fact that pre-oedipal integrative mechanisms of a narcissistic-magical nature, in which no external reality in the full sense is yet constituted, are substituted for a more mature relationship to 'objects' which fails to materialize to the extent to which a conflict cannot be mastered. This implies that in the defence process reality regresses, that is, becomes less objective, just as the ego regresses. In a neurotic symptom as well as in neurotic adjustment, in other words, the *organization* of reality itself is affected.⁶ The clinical and theoretical importance of this fact has not been recognized, to my knowledge, by psychoanalysts, even though the clinical evidence of it, particularly in character neuroses, is overwhelming.

In psychosis and character disorders the regression is more complete, and, as it were, unopposed by a more mature part of the ego, which in neurosis opposes the regression. Freud, in discussing the obsessive character and obsessional neurosis, formulates the difference between the two as follows: 'Both are the result of regression, but in the first the regression is complete...; in neurosis we find conflict, followed by efforts to prevent regression, reaction-formations against it and symptom-constructions representing compromises between the opposing tendencies...'.⁷

I have discussed the difference between integrative processes as such, and defence processes which are possible only on the basis of a certain

⁵ It should be kept in mind that neurotic processes, the Oedipus conflict being the prototype, as *the* infantile neurosis, form part of 'normal' development.

⁶ The situation becomes complicated by the fact that elements of later stages of integration with the environment are drawn into the regressive process and

reintegrated on the more primitive level, thus simulating more mature integration. This simulation of mature living is perhaps one of the most outstanding features in many character neuroses seen in analysis.

⁷ S. Freud: 'The Predisposition to Obsessional Neurosis.' *Coll. Papers*, 2, p. 130.

level of integration on which an ego and an external reality have already been differentiated to a sufficient degree. And I wish to emphasize that interaction as such, between individual and environment, cannot be understood as defence. Defence mechanisms, such as they occur in neurosis and normal adjustment, are specific and comparatively late processes, operations of faulty, regressive integration, in reaction to discrepancies between the integrative capacity of the individual and the level of integration of the external world, *once the individual has reached the (oedipal) stage in which what it interacts with has become for him an external world.* The central importance of defence operations in human life is due to the fact that active support and channelling of maturation processes play such a predominant role still *after* the organization of an ego-structure and the corresponding reality-organization, and more so in our culture. This fact creates and maintains constantly occasions for discrepancy and accounts for the ubiquity of neurotic adjustment. Support and channelling have to have been reasonably adequate in early childhood to make it possible for the child to reach the Oedipus level, to develop defences, which implies being able to fall back on earlier integrative mechanisms. If these early integrative processes are already decisively interfered with through lack of sufficient support and channelling, the result is ego-deficiency and deformation, not defence.

Since dynamics of neurotic symptom formation were largely understandable in terms of defensive dealing with conflict between the different psychic structures, there has been the tendency to interpret in terms of defence, dynamics as such, *any* interplay of forces in the organism-environment field, any interaction of psychic apparatus with 'reality', and specifically also the dynamics of early, pre-oedipal stages and their clinical derivatives.

⁸ Already in his early theoretical formulations, concerned with a 'neurological' psychology, Freud speaks of 'a tendency which may dominate the formation of the neurone system out of several systems: increasing warding off (*Abhaltung*) of quantity (of energy) from the neurones. The formation (*Aufbau*), then, of the neurone system would subserve the warding off, the function (of the neurone system) would be the discharge of quantity from the neurones' (Freud, *Aus den Anfängen der Psychoanalyse*, London, 1950; p. 391). In other words: defence against stimuli is the cause for, and abolition of stimuli the function of the neurone system.

⁹ The view expressed here should not be confused with Heinz Hartmann's concept of the conflict-free sphere. This, if I understand him correctly, is meant as a functional area in ego development which is, in

This all-inclusive use of the concept of defence obscures and confuses the understanding of concrete defence mechanisms and operations with which we deal in neurosis and in the psycho-analytic treatment of neurosis. And it misleads and falsifies the understanding of early development and psychotic and ego-defective states. Psycho-analytic theory, from its inception, has tended to understand the very organization of the psychic apparatus in terms of defence. The reality-principle is seen as a defensive modification of the pleasure-principle, and ultimately of the Nirvana-principle.⁸ Thus, the neurotogenic conflict situations, as the sources for the genesis of defence mechanisms, arising on the oedipal level and later, lose their distinctive character.⁹

The relationship between organism and environment, between individual and reality, in general has been understood in psycho-analytic theory as basically antagonistic. It is Freud's 'biological assumption' that a stimulus is something hostile to the organism and to the nervous system. Ultimately, instinct itself is understood as a need or compulsion to abolish stimuli.¹⁰ Any stimulus, as stimulus, represents a threat, a disturbance. On the psychological level, Freud comes to the conclusion that at the stage of the 'original reality-ego', 'at the very beginning, the external world, objects, and that which is hated were one and the same thing'.¹¹

This whole conception is neither in accord with modern biological thinking, nor with Freud's own insights concerning the differentiation of ego and external reality out of an original identity in the early stage of primary narcissism.

But just as instincts have been seen as opposed to external stimulation imposed upon the organism and the nervous system, so the individual has been understood as essentially opposed to and imposed upon by the external world and cultural development. In experiential terms this

the main, not promoted and not complicated by conflict, but by other factors. The present discussion deals, in contradistinction, with genetic problems of conflict and defence, and attempts to point out when, in ego-reality development, we can begin to speak of such phenomena as conflict and defence in the sense in which they are commonly understood in the psycho-analytic theory of neurosis.

¹⁰ 'It seems, then, that an instinct is a compulsion inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces' (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, London and New York, 1950, p. 47).

¹¹ S. Freud: 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes'. *Coll. Papers*, 4, p. 79.

is personified in the all-important hostile role of the father in the Oedipus situation and in the castration threat.

This, biological and cultural, theoretical framework itself has been shaped to a large extent by historical experience. Freud as well as many others before and after him have been profoundly influenced in their way of experiencing life, and therefore in their thinking, by the overwhelming and increasing impact of social-political, economical, and cultural changes on the individual. The high degree of differentiation and complexity of our civilization, which seems to have run away from its human sources and foundations and to have taken a course all its own, seldom mastered and understood, has led to the view that culture, and then reality as a whole, is basically and by definition inimical to the individual. The estrangement of man from his culture, from moral and religious norms which nevertheless continue to determine his conduct and thus are experienced as hostile impositions, and the fear and suppression of controlled but non-defensive regression, is the emotional and intellectual climate in which Freud conceived his ideas of the psychological structure of the individual and the individual's relationship to reality. It is also the climate in which neurosis grows—and here we hark back to our exposition of the neurotogenic conflict situation. The hostile, submissive-rebellious manipulation of the environment and the repressive-reactive manipulation of inner needs, so characteristic and necessary for man who cannot keep pace with the complexity of his culture, and for a culture which loses contact with its human origins, is the domain of neurotic development. It is the above-described discrepancy situation, repeated and re-enacted on a different level.

This historical experience is perhaps the main reason for the over-extension of the concept of defence in dynamic psychology—as well as for the rise of dynamic psychology itself. The discrepancy between the integrative capacity of the individual and the level on which the cultural environment and development has to be integrated by the individual in order still to be experienced as his own, and not as a hostile imposition, has constantly increased. But it is discrepancy, tension, conflict, that makes us aware of dynamics, of the interplay of forces which otherwise remains hidden. And we may understand psycho-analysis and psycho-analytic treatment itself as an expression and utilization

of the need to rediscover and reactivate the submerged communication channels leading from the origins of our lives to the solidified, alienated structures of behaviour, automatic attitudes and responses, cultural institutions, conventions and beliefs, neurotic symptom formations and defence systems and operations, which seem to have taken over and run their own inhuman course.

On three levels, then, the biological, psychological and cultural, psycho-analysis has taken for granted the neurotically distorted experience of reality. It has taken for granted the concept of a reality as it is experienced in a predominantly defensive integration of it. Stimulus, external world, and culture, all three, on different levels of scientific approach, representative of what is called reality, have been understood unquestioningly as they are thought, felt, experienced within the framework of a hostile-defensive, that is regressive-reactive ego-reality integration. It is a concept of reality as it is most typically encountered in the obsessive character neurosis, a neurosis so common in our culture that it has been called the normal neurosis.

Psycho-analysis has most searchingly analysed and shown us the neurotic structure and the defensive function of obsessive symptoms and of the obsessional character formation. But it has not recognized, in its dominant current, that psycho-analytic theory has unwittingly taken over much of the obsessive neurotic's experience and conception of reality and has taken it for granted as 'the objective reality'. While in this paper I cannot attempt to show in detail the parallels and similarities which, I believe, exist between the reality experienced by the obsessive character and the concept of reality implicit in psycho-analytic theory, I would like to point out a parallel, Freud's understanding of religion. He takes, as we know, the view that essentially religion is the equivalent of an obsessional neurosis in all its intricacies of a system of magical security operations. From our present perspective, it can be said that Freud took into consideration only certain, and not the most essential, aspects of religion; aspects, to be sure, which are elucidated to a considerable degree by his treatment of the problem. These aspects show a great deal of similarity with obsessive-compulsive symptoms in their structure, function, and genesis. The significant point, as a parallel to our thesis, is that Freud, living in a culture in which, for the majority of people,

the meaning and function of religion is narrowed down to these magical-compulsive aspects, took this to be what religion 'objectively' is.

In regard to the lack of a clear distinction between defence and integration as such, some further remarks may be indicated. Repression concerns the forward-moving tendencies of libidinal integration of and with reality. A distinction should be made between repression and what might be called canalization of libidinal forces. Not only the understanding of early, pre-oedipal integrative processes has remained confused by the tendency to interpret integration in terms of defence, but also that of later phases of development. The problems of transformation of primary into secondary processes; the 'translation' from unconscious to preconscious language of which Freud speaks in his early letters,¹² in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and again in his paper on 'The Unconscious'; and especially also the nature of the processes indicated under the title sublimation, have thus remained obscure.¹³

The conception of organism-environment, ego-reality, as an antagonistically related pair of opposites or isolated systems, lets the reality principle appear as a defensive-adaptive principle by virtue of which the pleasure principle becomes repressively modified, and phantasy becomes an isolated remnant of this earlier principle. In the process of reality testing and the establishment of the reality principle, phantasy is seen as split off. To the extent to which this happens as a defensive-reactive process, phantasy stays behind or has to be repressed in company with pregenital strivings. But this also

indicates something about the fate of the ego and of reality. To the extent to which phantasy is split off, ego and reality in their mutual integration become restricted and impoverished, as can be seen in hysterical and obsessional symptom formation and in the corresponding character disorders.

Projective-introjective processes, which are elements of the still rather obscure complex of integrative activities we call phantasy, continue, in more highly differentiated forms, to operate in the development and elaboration of reality during man's lifetime. Otherwise reality would be static (as indeed it has been conceived as being in psycho-analytic theory). It becomes static and hostile, visible in each individual patient, to the extent to which his life has become merely a defensive-reactive struggle. It is this neurotically impoverished reality, a form of reality that is exercising its great destructive power on all of us, in whose image the psycho-analytic concept of reality has been formed.

The psycho-analytic investigation and understanding of ego development and ego structure, as it progresses, will also lay the foundations for an understanding of the *dynamic* nature of reality. The clearer the distinction between integration as such and defensive types of integration becomes, the more apparent also will be the difference between the idea of an alien, hostile reality, as a finished product imposed on the unsuspecting infant and from there on forever after, and the integrated, dynamic reality, forever unfinished, on the elaboration and organization of which we spend our lives.¹⁴

¹² S. Freud: *Aus den Anfängen der Psychoanalyse* (Imago Publishing Co., London, 1950), p. 175.

¹³ Fenichel speaks of channelling and canalization in his discussion of sublimation. Yet he subsumes sublimation under the general heading of defences and calls it a successful defence, as against the pathogenic defences which are unsuccessful defences. The terminological and conceptual confusion concerning sublimation, the deficient understanding of what he calls the successful defences, comes out very clearly in his discussion of the subject, and is frankly admitted by him (Otto Fenichel; *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*, New York, 1945. Chapter 9: The Mechanisms of Defense, p. 141-167).

¹⁴ In a paper entitled, 'The Superego and the Theory of Social Systems' read at the Psychoanalytic Section of the American Psychiatric Association Meeting in Cincinnati, Ohio, 7 May, 1951 (Psychiatry, 1952, 15), Talcott Parsons expresses similar ideas concerning the dynamic structure of reality and reality integration. While he is mainly concerned with problems of the superego, he brings out very clearly the conception of the relationship between reality and the individual as an interaction system. He stresses particularly that not only the emotional and moral integration with reality, but also what he calls the 'cognitive frame of reference' is based on introjective-projective and identificatory interactions.